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Gentleman Joe's Double Eagle;

OR,

A DANCE AT FROG BACK CURVE,

BY THE AUTHOR OF "GENTLEMAN JOE."



GENTLEMAN JOE LEAPED FORWARD AND SNATCHED THE PISTOL FROM THE HAND OF THE BIG FELLOW, SENT HIM SPINNING ACROSS THE ROOM.

GENTLEMAN JOE'S DOUBLE EAGLE;

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By the Author of "GENTLEMAN JOE."

(Joseph E. Badger, Jr.)

CHAPTER I.

THE ROCKY RANGERS.

Joseph Gentry in the double role of a mining expert and a private detective had set out to locate a rich gold mine in the foot-hills of the Rocky Mountains.

He was employed by a mining company in Denver, which company had purchased the property on condition that it could be located and identified as it had been described by the promoters who sold it.

The Gilt-Edged Sport had spent the greater part of one day in a weary tramp over the hills where the property was supposed to be.

During the day he had not met a living soul nor had he found any trace of the alleged gold mine.

The sun was fast disappearing over the high peaks of the great mountain range to the west, and casting golden tints of mellow light over the hills and valleys below when he started to retrace his steps to the little station of Frog Back Curve, that was to be his headquarters while he remained in that section.

Standing on the peak of one of the foot-hills of the vast mountain that rose sharp and clearly defined above its fellows, he paused for a few moments to gaze at the beautiful scene around him, for Gentleman Joe had a keen appreciation of the beauties of nature in that wild and desolate country.

A thin wreath of blue smoke curling lazily upward through the clear atmosphere several miles to the east indicated the location of Frog Back Curve.

As far as the eye could reach in all directions, that was the only sign of life visible.

It was rapidly growing dark when Gentleman Joe, with a sigh of regret, turned from the beautiful scene and started down the hill at a quick pace in the direction of the station, which was several miles distant.

He had gone probably half a mile when the stillness of the gloaming was broken by the sound of a violin played by a skilled performer.

Such music in such a place sounded so strange and unnatural that Gentry stopped at once and listened.

The sound seemed to come from a point a little to the left and some distance farther down the hill.

The performer was playing a soft and slow lullaby, and the clear strains of the music seemed to vibrate in the air.

"I'll see what that means," said Gentry, and suiting the action to the word, he started off briskly in the direction of the music.

A rapid walk of five minutes and looking ahead, he was able to make out the dim outline of a small cabin standing in an open space on the side of the hill.

The sound of the music came from this cabin, and Gentry, feeling satisfied that the little structure was occupied

by some lone miner who had brought his violin with him into the Wild West, decided to pay him a call.

By this time the music had changed, and the player was rattling off a lively reel which sounded strangely out of place amid such surroundings.

Gentleman Joe walked forward straight toward the front door of the cabin, which in the faint light he could see stood wide open.

He felt that there was no need of extra caution in approaching the home of a man who had a soul for music and the skill to play so well.

But when he was within ten yards of the cabin the notes of the violin suddenly died away into a harsh, discordant sound, as if the bow had been rudely drawn across all the strings at once, and then the music ceased entirely.

Gentry was now within speaking distance of the cabin, but not a sound of any kind followed the cessation of the music.

There was no sign of life about the place, and when the sound of the violin died away the silence seemed to grow oppressive at once.

"Hello, partner! Go on with your music! Do not let me interrupt!"

There was no answer.

Not the faintest sound came from the dark interior of the rude structure.

Gentry became suspicious at once, and, drawing a pistol, he again called out to the invisible musician.

Still there was no answer, only unbroken silence when the echo of his own voice died away.

Stepping inside the cabin the Gilt-Edged Sport struck a match and glanced around.

There was no one present, and the floor and walls of the structure were bare.

Lighting his pocket lantern, which he always carried, Gentry took a better look at the place.

He found himself standing in a rude hut of logs and mud, the door of which had fallen down, the roof partly rotted away, and a general air of decay about the entire place.

It had evidently not been occupied as a human habitation for many months.

There was no sign of a violin or a violin player anywhere and Gentry rubbed his eyes to make sure that he was not dreaming.

There was only one door in the cabin, and one small window, which was not large enough to admit the passage of a man's body.

Gentry was puzzled.

He was sure that the sound of the violin playing had come from the interior of the cabin.

When the sound ceased he was so near the front door that he felt confident the player could not have gotten away without being seen in the dim light, which was sufficient to make even small objects visible at ten places.

One possible solution of the apparent mystery occurred to him.

There might be a hidden exit from the cabin either in the walls or the floor.

A hasty examination showed no trace of it, however. The cabin seemed to be a very plain and simple affair, such as miners put up in a hurry when they strike a vein of paying quartz and want to live close to their work.

Gentry shook his head in a mystified way, but he was not yet ready to give up the search.

He started in again, and this time he examined the walls and floor inch by inch.

Before he had made much progress he was interrupted.

A number of men were approaching the cabin.

At the sound of their voices it occurred to Gentleman Joe that if he were found in the cabin without a better excuse for his presence than he had to offer, he might be taken for an intruder who had no business there.

The new-comers were now only a short distance away, and he could not escape by the front door without being seen.

A hasty glance around showed Gentry that there was only one place where he could conceal himself.

The cabin contained a rude loft, a part of which was still in fair condition.

Reaching and catching one of the supporting rafters, Gentleman Joe swung himself up into the loft.

He was just in time.

Putting out his lantern, he stretched himself in a dark corner where it would be impossible for any one on the floor below to see him.

He had just got into position when a dozen men entered the cabin.

The new arrivals were talking in loud tones, and it was impossible for Gentry to avoid hearing what they were saying.

In a few moments he was glad that he could hear because he found that they were discussing something that directly concerned his mission to that section of the country.

One of the men below carried a small lantern which he placed in the middle of the room, but the light it gave out was so feeble that it was impossible to get a good look at any of the faces of the crowd.

There seemed to be ten or twelve of the new-comers and as they gathered in a circle around the lantern, one man with a heavy voice, who was evidently the leader, called out:

"Are we all here?"

"All here, Mike!" responded one of the gang.

"Well, boys, we will hear some news to-night," said the big leader who had been addressed as Mike.

"Con Conway is back from a trip to Denver. We will hear his report."

A tall, slender young man stepped forward and faced the leader.

"I found a buyer for the mine," he said.

"Good boy, Con. I knew you would. Why, I believe you could sell green peas for diamonds."

"But the trade is not closed yet. He's an old chap, Major Hank Hays, he calls himself, and he insists on coming down and looking at the property."

"We can fix that all right. Has he got the stuff?"

"Plenty of it."

"Then let him come along and fetch his cash with him."

"But there is some one else coming, and we must look out for him."

"What do you mean?"

"A company has been formed in Denver to buy the real Hamp Hull Mine."

"They will have to find it first, I reckon."

"That's just what they mean to do, and they have hired a man for the job who will find it if we don't find him first."

"Who is he?"

"He is the fellow known as Gentleman Joe!"

"The devil!"

"Well, that's what some people call him."

"When is he coming?"

"That I could not find out, as he is a chap who keeps his plans to himself. We will watch for him at the station. He may be down here any day."

"Then we must have your man come right along with his money and close the deal with him one way or another before Gentleman Joe gets here. We'll salt a mine to-morrow, and telegraph for him to come at once, as other parties are after the property."

During this conversation, Gentry had slowly and cautiously worked his way over to the very edge of the little piece of slender loft so that he could look down on the men below.

He wanted to get a good look at the face of the leader of this band, for he realized from what he had heard that he might soon have important business with that individual.

He wanted to be able to recognize him at sight when they met again, which would probably be very soon.

Gentleman Joe moved carefully, but just as he reached the edge of the loft, and before he had been able to clearly make out a single face, a coin slipped from his pocket and dropped to the floor with a sharp, clear ring.

The coin fell almost at the feet of the leader of the gang, and that individual promptly picked it up.

"What the duse!" he exclaimed.

"Boys, here is a double eagle of pure gold? Is it raining money, or did one of you fellows drop the coin?"

The men all answered in the negative, in fact they had been somewhat startled by the sound of the coin falling on the floor of the cabin.

Gentleman Joe expected that a search of the place and his discovery were likely to follow in a hurry, and with one hand on his pistol, he quietly awaited developments.

The members of the gang were gathered around their leader looking at the coin by the dim light of the lantern, when a sound of footsteps was heard approaching the cabin on the run.

A moment later an excited individual dashed into the room and rushed straight up to the leader.

He was so near out of breath that he could not speak for several moments, and in that time Gentry managed to get one brief glimpse of his face.

The new arrival was a coal-black negro.

"What's the matter, Joe?" asked the leader of the gang, as he gave the negro a vigorous shake to help him get back his lost breath.

"Good Lawdy, Mars' Mike! dars' a man in de cabin!"

"Of course there is a man in the cabin, you black fool, the best man in the West. There are some other pretty good men here, too. Come, what is the matter with you?"

"Sho', Mars' Mike, I ain't a-foolin', 'deed I ain't. Dar's a strange man in de cabin! I seen him come in, an' I ain't seen him go out!"

"Well, where is he, Joe? Point him out, and we'll soon find out what he is doing here."

"I dunno whar he is, but he bound to be here, 'cause he couldn't get out 'ceptin' he went down de slide, an' he ain't gone dat way."

"How did he get in here? Come, what are you talkin' about, anyway?"

"Why, jes' now I wus a-playin' de fiddle, 'here in de cabin, an' I seen a strange man a-comin' right up to de door. I jes' scooted down de slide wid me fiddle. Den he come right on in, an' he went a-thumpin' an' a-bangin'."

and round like he was huntin' somethin'. I been a-watchin' an' he ain't neber come out."

The leader of the gang recalling the falling of the gold coin, concluded that there might be something in the story of the negro after all.

He glanced hastily about the room, but only members of his own band were present, or at least visible.

Signs of alarm were evident among the men, and most of them had already grasped their weapons as if they had expected an attack from some invisible source.

"There is the loft, captain; we might search that," suggested Con Conway.

Gentleman Joe, who had been an interested listener to all this conversation, saw that discovery was certain.

But his nerves were as steady as the walls of the cabin, and he had no fear of the result.

He started to get into a position to be ready to defend himself just as Conway suggested a search of the loft.

Then, without warning, the rotten old rafters of the structure gave way and Gentleman Joe and the loft went down together.

They struck the floor with a crash right in the middle of the startled gang of men.

The loft was broken into a hundred pieces, but Gentry was unhurt by the fall, and was on his feet in a moment ready to take advantage of the excitement.

He was within easy reach of the lantern, which was still sitting on the floor.

One well-aimed kick shattered that, and the room was in total darkness, before the gang had a chance to catch a glimpse of the face of the man who had dropped from the loft.

The moment the crash of the fall came, Black Joe, the negro, who knew there was a man in the cabin, uttered one wild yell of terror, and, dashing through the open door, fled through the darkness as fast as his legs could carry him.

When he kicked the light out, Gentleman Joe, with a pistol in each hand, made a quick dash through the circle of startled men, and was out at the door and twenty yards away before any one of them clearly realized what had happened.

When the Rocky Rangers did finally come to their senses, and running out of the cabin began to fire at random in the darkness, the man from Denver was safely out of their reach.

He did not stop to return their fire, but hurried on to his destination.

CHAPTER II.

THE HAMP HULL MINE.

Gentleman Joe was up and dressed at an early hour on the morning following his adventure with the Rocky Rangers.

As soon as he had eaten a breakfast of bacon and eggs, he walked over to the little telegraph office at the railroad station in Frog Back Curve.

He had made up his mind to send a telegram to Major Hank Hays, of Denver, warning him not to come to close the trade for a gold mine.

When Gentry entered the little room occupied by the telegraph office, he heard the sharp click of the instruments and saw the operator busy at the keys.

Close by the side of the operator, stood a tall, slender

man, dressed in the garb of a miner, and holding in his hand a repeating rifle.

His back was toward the door, but something in his general appearance satisfied the Gilt-Edged Sport that he had seen the man before.

Acting on a sudden impulse, Gentry walked right up to the desk of the operator, and, glancing over his shoulder, read the contents of the roughly scrawled message which lay open on the table.

The message was addressed to "Major Hank Hays, Denver."

It read:

"Come at once and bring money to close trade for mine; other parties want it. CON CONWAY."

With a quick movement, Gentry reached over the shoulder of the operator and picked up the message.

"You must not send this!" he said, sharply.

The operator looked up in surprise, and the tall man with a rifle turned fiercely on the intruder.

"What the devil do you mean?" he asked, in an angry tone.

"I am going to block your game, if I can."

"What game are you talking about?"

"Your attempt to swindle a man by selling him a bogus mine."

"Who are you, and what do you know about this?"

"Never mind who I am. If I am in time to block your swindle, that is sufficient."

"You are an impertinent meddler."

"You are welcome to think so," replied Gentleman Joe, quietly.

The tall man suddenly snatched a pistol from his belt, and, leveling it at the head of the telegraph operator, said:

"Send that message, or I'll blow your brains out!"

The frightened and trembling operator started to obey.

Before his fingers had touched the keys, Gentleman Joe leaped forward, and snatching the pistol from the hand of the big fellow, caught that individual by the shoulders and sent him spinning across the room.

"Now take yourself out of here," he said, sternly, as the man staggered to his feet.

For a moment the fellow stood up, scowling at his assailant, and then, picking up his rifle, turned and walked out of the room without a word.

Gentleman Joe threw his pistol out after him.

Turning back to the operator, the Gilt-Edged Sport said, quietly:

"I have a message I want you to send at once."

Obtaining a pen and a telegraph blank, he wrote:

"MAJOR HANK HAYS, Denver:

"Do not come. The mine you have agreed to buy is a swindle. JOSEPH GENTRY."

By this time the operator was speechless with fear and amazement.

He picked up the message, and, glancing at it, mechanically touched the keys of his instrument.

Two or three clicks followed, and then the sharp report of a rifle, fired just outside the office, caused the operator to jump half out of his seat.

When he sat down with a white face and struck the key again, there was no response.

"The wire is down!" he said, in explanation.

Gentleman Joe went outside to investigate.

He saw the man whom he supposed was Con Conway walking rapidly away with his rifle over his shoulders.

Glancing up at the telegraph wire, he saw that it had been cut in two between the office and the nearest pole, and that the ends were dangling on the ground.

The rifle shot was explained.

The man whose message had been intercepted had in a measure evened up matters by shooting the telegraph wire in two.

Gentry hurried back into the office, and explaining the situation to the operator, asked how long it would take to repair the break.

That young man, who was still white and trembling with terror, responded that it could not be done for several hours.

This delay was provoking, but there was nothing to do but to wait until the wire could be repaired.

This period of enforced idleness Gentleman Joe spent in strolling about the little town, getting his bearings and making the acquaintance of such of the inhabitants as might be of use to him some time if matters turned out to be as interesting as they promised.

When he went back to the telegraph office the first sound that greeted his ears was the sharp click of the keys, showing that the wire had been repaired and that the operator was already at work.

As he entered the young man at the instrument looked up with a start and his face indicated that he had some news.

Glancing over the shoulder of the operator, Gentry saw that he was receiving a dispatch addressed to Con Conway.

It read:

"I start on next train. Will arrive to-morrow, ready to close trade for the mine."

The message was signed by Major Hank Hays, of Denver, and Gentry knew that it was now too late to warn him by telegraph not to come.

The only thing he could do was to meet the major on his arrival, and have a talk with him before he paid out any money for the mine.

In the meantime Gentleman Joe determined to gather a little more information about this mining property.

Frog Back Curve was the junction of a railroad and stage-coach line, and while it was no more than a straggling village supported by the miners and prospectors who worked in the near-by diggings, it was like all Western towns, a place of great expectations.

The keeper of the one hotel in the place, which was also a station of the stage-coach line, was Reuben Waters, who was assisted by his wife and daughter.

Waters had been in that part of the West for a number of years, having come there first as a miner and prospector.

Failing in that he secured employment with the first stage company that ran its coaches so far west of civilization, and finally sending for his family, he settled down to keep the eating-house and station.

To Waters Gentleman Joe turned as a man likely to know something of the claim known as the Hamp Hull Mine.

As the landlord was a talkative fellow, it seemed an easy matter to obtain all the information he possessed on almost any subject.

After dinner Gentry strolled into the small drinking room attached to the hotel, and finding the place clear of customers, he asked Waters to join him in a cigar, and then proceeded to fish for the facts he wanted.

"You have been here a long time, I believe?" he began.

"I was the first white man who crossed the Frog Back range," responded Waters, proudly.

"Then you must know something about the mining interests of this section?"

"I know the location and value of every claim within twenty miles of the station."

"What do you know about the Hamp Hull Mine?"

The talkative landlord stopped short, a look of startled surprise came over his face, and coming out from behind the little bar behind on which he had been leaning his elbows, he brought over a camp-stool and sat down close by the side of Gentry before he spoke a word in reply to this question.

"Who told you about that?" he asked, in a low tone.

"No one has told me very much about it. I have heard that it is a very rich claim, and as I am prospecting for good mining property, I thought I would investigate."

Waters got up, and, after looking around nervously to make sure that they had not been overheard, he crossed the room and closed and locked the door.

"You are not going to look for that mine?" he asked, in a whisper.

"Perhaps, if it is worth looking for," replied Gentry, who was puzzled by the actions of the landlord.

"Don't do it!"

Waters spoke in an awed whisper.

"And why not?"

"Others have looked for it and failed."

"That is no reason why I should fail if such a claim really exists."

"Some of those who searched for it may have found it, but if so, they never came back to tell the story."

"What do you mean? Don't talk in riddles."

"There is a strange fatality about the Hamp Hull Mine."

"I am not a bit superstitious."

"Have you heard the story of the claim?"

"No."

"It is a strange story."

"Tell it, and let me judge for myself."

"Among the first miners who searched for gold in this section was Hamp Hull. He was an idle fellow with a terrible temper, and was always handy with his pistols. It was said that he had a bad record of murder and robbery and had been run out of several camps before he turned up here, but no one could prove that, and not a man dared make the charge to his face.

"One night in a drunken quarrel over a game of cards, Hull killed two of the best fellows in camp. It was a cold-blooded, double murder, and then the boys rose as one man to rid the camp of the murderer.

"Hull succeeded in giving them the slip, and escaped to the foot-hills beyond the diggings. For months he was not seen or heard of, and it was supposed that he had been killed by the Indians, who swarmed in the hills at that time.

"But, finally, some of the prospectors, who went miles beyond the diggings in search of new outcroppings, began to bring back stories of having seen a wild man lurking about the ravines at the foot of the range.

"One of them who got a good look at the fellow's face insisted that the wild man was Hamp Hull. Some of the boys laughed at him, but there were others who believed the story.

"No one was able to get near enough to this man to

speak to him, and in a short time he disappeared and was not seen again.

"Several months later a rough-looking old man came down out of the hills with as much pure dust and rich quartz as he could carry. He converted the stuff into coin at the station, and then slipped away without a word to any one as to where he got it.

"In a few weeks the old fellow came again with more gold, and then his visits, or rather, his trading trips, followed at regular intervals until the curiosity of the camp was aroused. Some of the boys who were not doing well wanted to get a chance at the field where all this stuff was coming from.

"One time two of them followed the old fellow when he left camp. They started out to track him to his claim. It may have been a mean thing to do, but if it was, they paid the price. They never came back, and weeks afterward two skeletons were found far up in the hills. There was a bullet hole in the skull of each.

"Of course skeletons could not be identified, and if they could there was no proof as to who fired the shots, but the camp accepted it as a fact that the bones were those of the two boys who had started to track the old man of the hills to his claim.

"The old man did not come back for a long time, and when he did, he got out of camp with greater haste than ever before. Then some of the boys started a story that the old fellow was Hamp Hull in disguise.

"When he came again three of the boys were on the lookout for him. They slipped up behind him and tore a false beard and wig from his head, disclosing the wicked face of Hamp Hull.

"Three shots were fired quick as lightning, and the three boys who had taken the risk of exposing the outlaw, went down before they had a chance to draw and defend themselves. Again Hull got away, this time with half the men in camp hot on his trail and firing at him at every jump. He reached the hills and disappeared, and that was the last time any one in this camp saw him.

"Some time later another skeleton was found near the foot of the Rockies, and as no one was missing from camp, it was supposed that Hull was dead at last.

"A year passed, and claims had been located and worked all over the region that had been the stamping-ground of the desperate outlaw. Then there came rumors from time to time that somewhere in a ravine that it was almost impossible to locate there was one of the richest surface mines in all the West, and that it was the one that had been so long and profitably worked by Hamp Hull.

"Some of the prospectors who went searching for this place failed to find it, but they came back with wild stories of having seen the ghost of Hull skulking about the hills at night. There were others who never came back. What they found, or what became of them, no one knows. They went up into the hills in search of this mine, and that was the last seen or heard of them.

"In time the mention of the name of the Hamp Hull Mine was enough to send a cold shiver down the back of the bravest man in these diggings, and for a while no one made any further effort to find it. But there was a rich vein of gold somewhere, and for the yellow stuff men will take great risks. Some of the sharps who flocked to the diggings started the scheme of selling quit claims to the mine to strangers who were told of its fabulous yield while the history of the place was kept from them.

"Some of these poor, deluded devils went in search of

the mine, and were never seen again. Then the sharks, afraid to work the game here in the camp any more, sent agents to Denver and other cities with alleged samples of the yield and formed companies to develop the property. Some of these companies sent agents down here to investigate and such of them as were not deterred by the stories they heard went up into the hills and didn't return.

"Of late there is a gang of desperate fellows working this mythical mine on unsuspecting strangers whenever and wherever they can. These fellows are known as the Rocky Rangers. They are nothing more than a band of outlaws. It is said that they have some worthless claims somewhere in the diggings which they salt down and show to strangers and in that way get large sums of money out of some of them. The victims, when they discover the swindle, find that they have no redress. They cannot find the men who swindled them and they go away, sadder, but, perhaps, wiser men."

Gentleman Joe had listened with interest to this long story of the Hamp Hull Mine. He had heard a little of it before, but most of it was entirely new to him.

"Do you believe that there is really a rich mine somewhere in the hills you have described?" he asked, when Waters had finished.

"I am sure of it. Hull sold some of the finest specimens of quartz I ever saw and lots of pure dust. It certainly came from a mine somewhere."

"Then I will find that mine!"

"Speak lower!" said Waters, in a whisper, as he placed his fingers to his lips. "If you are determined to take that desperate chance, let no one know your plans."

"I have spoken to no one except you. I shall depend on you to keep my affairs to yourself."

"You can trust me for that, but I warn you that you are undertaking a dangerous job."

"I am accustomed to danger, and rather enjoy it at times."

"All I can say is that I hope you may succeed. If you can find Hamp Hull, or his ghost, there is many a one of the lads around here who would like to have a hand in putting him out of the way for good."

"Perhaps they may find that opportunity sooner than you or they expect."

"You talk hopefully."

"I am accustomed to succeed in everything that I undertake. I have no intention of failing in this."

"Here's to your success!" and in his enthusiasm, Waters set up the drinks, which was a remarkable thing for him to do.

With another word of caution to the landlord to say nothing to any one of their conversation, Gentry went out for a stroll to help kill time.

It was now too late in the day to go out on a search for the mine, and as he had made up his mind to meet Major Hays and have a talk with him, there was nothing to do but kill time until the following morning.

The early train from Denver was on time, and one of the first passengers who stepped off at Frog Back Curve was a tall, military-looking man, with gray hair and beard.

He was followed by three other men who looked like miners or mining engineers.

Gentleman Joe, who was in the crowd gathered about the station, stepped forward, and, addressing the military-looking man, said:

"Have I the honor of addressing Major Hank Hays, of Denver?"

"You have, sir! I am Major Hays, of the Fourth Kansas, in the late war, sir! What can I do for you?"

"I would like a few moments' conversation with you on a matter of business."

"Very well, sir, I am here on business."

"You have come to buy a gold mine?"

"Well, I must say that you seem to be pretty well informed as to my business. But perhaps you are one of the company interested in the property?"

"No, I am not."

"Then may I ask who you are?"

"A man who would do you a friendly turn."

"I am always looking for friends, young man. What is it you would do for me?"

"Warn you against the mine you have come to buy and the men who propose to sell it to you."

"What do you know about them?"

"The mine is a swindle, the men a gang of scoundrels."

"How do you know this?"

"Never mind; I can supply the proof if necessary."

"Really, I begin to suspect that you have an opposition mine to sell."

Gentry flushed, but managed to keep his temper.

"I have nothing to sell. I simply warn you to beware of the Rocky Rangers and their mine, or you may lose your money, and possibly your life."

"My young friend, I fought in sixty battles in the late war. I feel able to take care of my life, and my money is my own."

"Excuse me for presuming to offer you any advice. I shall not interfere again unless it is actually necessary."

Gentleman Joe turned away from the major angry and disgusted that his friendly warning should have been received in such a spirit.

As he turned around he found himself face to face with a big, rough-featured individual, who had evidently been standing where he could overhear the conversation that had taken place.

"Take that, you meddling fool!" hissed the stranger, in a low tone, as Gentry came within arm's length.

As he spoke the fellow made a vicious thrust with a knife which he had held concealed under his coat.

The Gilt-Edged Sport leaped out of the way like a flash, and as he sprang aside, he drew a small revolver from his pocket.

His assailant leaped at him again with the knife uplifted.

There was the sharp report of a pistol, and the knife fell to the ground from the shattered hand that a moment before had held it.

A crowd gathered in a few moments.

The wounded man picked up his knife from the ground with the uninjured hand and slipping through the crowd, disappeared in a moment.

The excitement soon subsided, and Gentry turned to leave the scene.

As he did so a harsh voice, speaking in a low tone, almost hissed into his ear:

"You will never find the Hamp Hull Mine!"

He turned quickly to see who had spoken, but the crowd had already begun to scatter, and in a moment he was alone.

CHAPTER III.

THE BLACK ARROW.

Mike Molony, leader of the Rocky Rangers, standing in front of a rude stone cabin which stood on top of one of the foot-hills of the Rocky Mountains, gazed anxiously down a narrow trail leading to the valley below.

For an hour he had been pacing back and forth in front of the door, and his limited stock of patience was almost exhausted.

Finally the sound of a sharp, shrill whistle coming from somewhere down the trail, caused him to utter a grunt of satisfaction.

Placing his fingers to his lips, he gave an answering signal.

A moment later a short, dwarfish-looking man came out of the underbrush down the side of the hill and advanced toward the cabin at a slow trot.

He came up and dropped in a heap at the feet of the leader of the Rocky Rangers.

"Well, Dinky, have you been lost? I thought you were never coming back."

The little man on the ground was gasping for breath, and it was several moments before he answered.

"It's a long way, cap," he blurted out, finally, between his gasps for breath.

The man had been running until he was almost exhausted.

"What news do you bring?" asked the big ruffian, with a scowl.

"Good," replied the dwarf, with a grin that revealed a set of long yellow teeth, which gave to his face an expression of ferocity resembling the snarl of a wild-cat.

"Well, what is it? Speak out, man! Don't sit there grinning in that idiotic way."

"The man from Denver has come."

"Which man?"

"The one who is going to buy the mine."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Yes, he is coming out with Con."

"Did he bring the money?"

"I don't know. You can find out when he gets here."

"When will they be here?"

"They are coming now, and ought to get here to-night."

"That is good. We will sell the mine before morning if they come."

"The other man has come, too."

"What other man?"

"The other man from Denver."

"Do you mean Gentleman Joe?"

"Yes."

"How do you know he is here?"

He tried to stop the other man from coming, and warned him not to buy the mine."

"Then you have seen the fellow?"

"Yes, we have all seen him."

"And you will know his face when you see it again?"

The little dwarf laughed a harsh, mirthless laugh as he replied:

"You know Dinky Dobbins. He never forgets a face or an injury."

"Where is this Gentleman Joe now?"

"We left him at the station."

Mike Molony was ill pleased with the news that Gentleman Joe was in the vicinity.

He had suspected as much since the night the stranger dropped from the loft of the deserted cabin and escaped in the darkness.

Molony and his men were almost certain that this man was none other than the terrible Gentleman Joe.

Now that Dinky Dobbins had brought news that the Gilt-Edged Sport was at Frog Back Curve, Molony was convinced that their first suspicion was correct.

With a gruffly spoken order to the dwarf to go and get food if he wanted it, the leader of the Rocky Rangers turned and entered the cabin.

He rapped sharply on the floor three times.

A moment later a door opened and a woman entered from another room.

She was tall and slender, with long dark hair hanging down over her shoulders.

Her face was thin and white, but her gleaming black eyes showed that she was a woman of strong passion and will, and one who would make a dangerous enemy when once aroused.

The woman was dressed in black, and the expression of her face was one of sadness and indifference to her surroundings.

"Did you call, Mike?" she asked, in a low tone.

"Yes, my dear," responded the big outlaw, in a voice as gentle as he knew how to assume.

"What is it you want?"

"Come sit down. I want a little talk with you."

The woman advanced slowly across the room, and dropped down on a low stool facing the chief of the Rocky Rangers.

"I have something I want you to do," said Molony, as he began to stroke the woman's soft black hair.

She started back, and for a moment her eyes flashed angrily.

"I told you once I would have nothing more to do with your devilish work."

"But this is something easy, Mary, my dear. It is a delicate piece of work, that only a woman of your charms and shrewdness can accomplish."

"What is it you want done?"

"You know we are about to close a trade for a big mine."

"I know you are going to swindle a victim if you can."

"Don't use any harsh words to-night, my dear. You know there is a fortune for all of us if it goes through."

"You have said so. That is all I know about it."

"You do not doubt my word?"

"I have good reason to."

"I am telling you the truth as you will soon find out if you do what I wish."

"Well, what is the work? Speak out."

"There is a man at the station who threatens to interfere with our trade."

"And you want him put out of the way?"

The woman asked the question coldly, but her big black eyes looked straight into the face of the outlaw chief with a searching glance that made him wince.

"No, not that," he answered, after a moment's hesitation.

"Then what is it you want done?"

"We must get him out of the game for a day or two until we can sell the mine."

"Oh, I see. You want me to entertain him during that time."

"No, not that, but you might induce him to pay us a visit, and once we get him up here to the fort, we will see to it that he does not meddle in other people's affairs until we have closed the deal."

The woman bowed her head in her hands, and was silent for several moments.

When she looked up, there was a fierce, threatening gleam in her black eyes, and her voice trembled as she spoke.

"If I do this for you, Mike Molony, will you keep your promise to me?"

"What promise, my dear?"

"You know well enough what I mean. Your promised to take me away from this life and this wild country."

"You know that I will do that as soon as I can."

"And that will be very soon," answered the woman, as her face flushed with a sudden fierce passion.

She clinched her hands, and, springing to her feet, glared down at the big outlaw, who shrank from her searching gaze.

"You have lied to me long enough," she hissed.

"You have made a tool of me, and now you are getting ready to cast me off, but you cannot do it."

"You wrong me, my dear girl," stammered Molony, in a hesitating voice.

"I do not, and you know it."

"Be reasonable to-night. The work on hand is important."

"I am reasonable. I will undertake this job, but you may as well understand now that it will be my last. If you fail to keep your promise this time, you know what to expect."

"I will always keep my promise."

The right hand of the woman had for several moments been tightly clinched on the handle of a dagger which was concealed in the bosom of her dress, but, with a sigh, she let her hands fall to her side and resumed her seat.

Molony proceeded to give her detailed instructions as to the part she was to play in the work which he wanted her to do.

The woman listened in silence until he had finished, and then she walked slowly into the adjoining room without a word.

She did not once glance backward, so the gleam of triumph that lighted up the evil face of the outlaw chief passed unnoticed.

When the door had closed behind her, Mike Molony arose and passed out of the cabin.

"The girl is getting too much spirit; she needs taming," he said to himself, as he went out into the yard to look for Dinky Dobbins.

That important member of the gang was nowhere in sight.

Night had fallen, and still there was no sign of the coming of Con Conway and his intended victim, who was to purchase the mine.

Molony and his men had been busy for two days fixing up an old claim which they proposed to work off on Major Hays, of Denver, as the Hamp Hull property.

The finances of the gang were running low, and they were determined not to be prevented making this deal.

If their intended victim had money, they meant to have it by fair means or foul.

For several minutes the outlaw chief paced up and down in front of the door, his anxiety and impatience increasing every moment.

A rustling and crashing of the underbrush and the sound of flying footsteps coming down the hill behind the stone hut startled the outlaw chief.

A small fire was burning inside the cabin and through the open door showed a flickering light, which lighted up a small space outside.

Into this light there suddenly dashed a black figure that was panting and gasping for breath.

Molony had drawn his revolver, expecting an attack from some unknown quarter.

The man who had come dashing down the hill at such a rate, proved to be Black Joe, the fiddler.

His face was distorted, and his eyes seemed ready to drop from their sockets, he was so badly frightened.

"What is the matter, Joe?" asked the chief, who could not suppress a smile at the fright of the negro.

"Good Lordy, Cap'n Mike, I done seen a ghost!"

"Where did you see it, Joe?"

"Up top de hill."

"What did it look like?"

"Sho' I cawn't tell you, but it's comin' dis way."

The negro dropped to the ground.

He was trembling all over and his teeth chattered so much that it was almost impossible for him to speak.

Molony tried in vain to obtain from him some intelligent account of what he had seen.

All he could get was, that Black Joe, in coming across the hill-top, had seen a ghost-like figure advancing toward him in the darkness, making a strange noise, and waving its arms in some sort of weird signals.

The negro had waited to see no more.

With his heart in his throat, he had made a wild dash for the cabin of the gang.

The outlaw chief did not believe in ghosts, but he was puzzled by the story and the actions of the negro.

He knew that Black Joe had seen something, and that it was an object which had frightened him almost out of his wits.

Molony told the negro to go inside and turned to follow him.

As he did so, a small black object shot through the line of firelight past the open door-way, and fell to the ground almost at his feet.

He stooped down, and, picking up the fallen object, took it into the cabin, where there was a light.

It proved to be a long arrow, such as Indians had formerly used when their principal weapon was the bow.

The arrow was painted black, and the head-piece was of dark stone.

A hasty examination of the arrow disclosed the fact that it conveyed a message.

On the black stone point there was rudely carved a skull and cross-bones.

On the other side was the rough outline of a dagger.

Looking closer, Molony found attached to the rod of the arrow a small piece of paper.

Taking this off, he found rudely scrawled thereon this significant warning:

"Keep out of range of the Black Arrow."

CHAPTER IV.

MOURNFUL MARY.

"You are Gentleman Joe?"

It was the voice of a woman that spoke, and the tone was soft and low.

The Gilt-Edged Sport, strolling slowly along one of the streets of the little station and village of Frog Back Curve, wheeled around at the sound of the voice to find at his elbow a woman dressed in black.

"I am sometimes called by that name," he answered, as he tried to make out the features of the one who had addressed him.

It was growing dark, and the woman wore a veil, so he could only make out that she was tall and slender, that her hair and eyes were black, and that she seemed to be in trouble.

"If you are Joseph Gentry, of Denver, you are the man I am looking for," the woman went on, and there seemed to be a wail of sorrow in her voice.

"I am that individual. What can I do for you?"

"For me, nothing."

"Then what is it you want?"

"I come from a friend of yours who is in trouble."

"I have no friends in this place."

"Pardon me, but I understood that the man was a friend of yours."

"Who is the man? Speak out!"

"Major Hank Hays, of Denver."

"He is not a friend of mine; we are strangers."

The woman drew back for a moment, and seemed greatly surprised.

Then she went on in a trembling voice:

"I do not understand the situation, sir. I was intrusted with a message to deliver to you. It may be that I have made a mistake."

"What is the message?"

"The man who calls himself Major Hays asked me to say to you that his life is in great danger, and to beg of you to come to his aid at once."

"He told you to say that to me?"

"He did, sir, and I have risked my life to deliver the message."

"Who are you, and where do you come from?"

The woman bowed her head, and was silent for a moment.

"People call me Mournful Mary," she said at last, and a sob seemed to choke her voice as she spoke.

"I am only a woman of the hills and plains, drifting here and there, with no home and no friends. I come from the man who called you his friend, and asked that you come to his aid."

Gentry was puzzled by the manner of the woman.

He had encountered many strange specimens of the sex in the West, but this one differed from all the others.

He had known women living the wild life of the West who would stop at nothing, yet at times had all the tenderness of their gentler and more refined sisters.

Knowing well the excitement and temptation of such a

life, he was always ready to believe that there was some good in every woman.

But in spite of his sympathy for the sex there was something about the one who had introduced herself as Mournful Mary that made him suspicious.

He knew that he had never seen her before, and he was puzzled to know how she had found him out, and why she had selected a spot where they were likely to be free from observation to talk to him.

"Where is Major Hays?" Gentry asked.

"He is a prisoner up in the hills."

"In whose hands is he a prisoner?"

"He is in the hands of a bold and dangerous gang of men."

"The Rocky Rangers, perhaps."

Gentry was watching the woman closely, and he saw her give a start at the mention of the name of the outlaw band.

"I believe they call themselves by that name," she replied, after a short pause.

"Then how did you manage to see him?"

"I know some members of the band. They trust me."

"Trust you not to reveal their secrets?"

"Yes."

"How did you manage to speak with the prisoner and then come away with his message without arousing suspicion?"

"I come and go at will in this part of the country. No one would think of stopping me. The man who is a prisoner evidently thought he could trust me. He asked me to come down here and find you and deliver the message that I gave to you. I told him I would do so. That is the whole story. You may trust me or not, as you please."

"I have not said that I distrusted you. Major Hays is not a friend of mine. He may know something of me, and it is possible that he decided to send for me if he is really in danger."

"Will you go to his aid?"

"How am I to find him?"

"I will show you the way."

"I thought so."

The woman turned half around with a start.

"Why did you think so?" she asked, nervously.

"Because you have been sent to entice me into the hills by some means, and naturally you are ready to lead the way to the point where I am to go."

The woman began to cry.

"You wrong me," she exclaimed, between her sobs.

"I am sorry if I do."

"I have risked a great deal to do what I thought was a service for a man who is a stranger to me, and you distrust me for trying to do one good deed."

"I beg your pardon if I am too suspicious."

"You need not go if you are afraid to trust me."

The woman was still sobbing, but Gentleman Joe could not overcome the feeling that she was playing a part.

He decided, however, to see the game through to the end.

His manner toward the woman changed suddenly.

Advancing a step, he held out his hand.

"Forgive me if I have done you an injustice," he said.

"I am sure you are a brave woman to come in search of help for a stranger."

The woman dried her tears.

"Perhaps you had a right to be suspicious," she said.

"That does not matter now. If you will be so kind as to show me the way, I will go and see what I can do for the man you say is a prisoner in the hands of a band of outlaws."

"Will you go alone?"

"Alone, except the company of my fair guide."

"You are very brave."

"I do not call it brave to go to the aid of a fellow-man in danger. But come, we may be wasting precious time here. If you will lead on, I am ready to follow."

The manner of the woman had changed entirely.

She no longer seemed sad and dispirited, but was cheerful and apparently well pleased with the success of her mission.

This sudden change in the manner of Mournful Mary

was to Gentleman Joe proof of the suspicion he had entertained from the first.

Darkness had settled over the little mining town and station and the hills to the west when the couple started on their mission.

But there was a quarter moon, and its faint light was enough to enable them to distinguish objects at a short distance.

The woman seemed entirely familiar with the country, and she was evidently accustomed to long tramps.

She led the way, and set a pace that was fast enough for the Gilt-Edged Sport, who was all the time keeping a close watch on the woman and a sharp lookout around him to guard against surprise.

Very little conversation passed between them as they hurried on along the narrow foot-trail that led to the gold diggings in the hills to the west.

Gentry soon began to recognize some of the landmarks, and then he knew that they were heading straight for the deserted cabin where he had first encountered the Rocky Rangers.

As they hurried on over the rough trail he asked no questions, but his keen eyes never wandered away from the veiled woman in front of him long at a time.

For two hours the steady tramp continued, and then as they reached the top of one of the smaller hills they caught sight of the light of a camp-fire that seemed to be near the trail a mile or so in front.

At sight of this light the woman stopped short for a moment, and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What is the matter?" asked Gentry, who was quick to note that something was wrong.

"Nothing," answered the woman, quickly, as she moved forward again.

But Gentry noticed that she moved at a slower pace and with greater caution.

She continued to follow the trail, however, until they were within a hundred yards of the camp-fire.

Then the woman turned aside and started as if she were going to make a detour around the camp.

As she did so, Gentry caught her by the arm and asked: "Why are you dodging the camp?"

The woman stopped and hesitated. As he held her arm, Gentry could feel that she was trembling.

"We had better avoid the camp; we might be detained," the woman finally stammered.

"Why should we be detained?"

"I do not know."

"Nor I. Do you know anything of the people in camp there?"

"No, I do not."

"Then we will find out something about them. They may be honest miners, and might agree to assist us in the work of rescue."

"We had better hurry on, or you may be too late."

The anxiety of the woman to avoid the camp settled the case.

Keeping one hand on the arm of Mournful Mary, Gentry started toward the camp-fire.

The woman continued to protest until he sternly ordered her to keep quiet.

As they were cautiously advancing through the woods to the camp a man who had been lying on a blanket in the shadow got up and stirred the fire.

Gentleman Joe recognized the man at a glance.

He was Major Hays, of Denver. The woman had also recognized the man by the fire, and she knew that her game was up.

With an exclamation of anger and disappointment, she attempted to break away from Gentry, who still held her arm.

The movement failed.

"Come on," said the Gilt-Edged Sport, quietly. "This seems to be the man we are looking for. Perhaps he has already escaped from the outlaws. We will go on to the camp and find out."

The couple advanced a few feet farther.

Then out of the dark woods around them sprang up half a score of armed men.

"Hands up!" cried a harsh voice, which Gentry recognized.

He had heard it once before.

It was that of the man who led the Rocky Rangers when they were assembled in the deserted cabin.

The Gilt-Edged Sport did not put up his hands.

A glance around showed that the men had formed in a circle about him and his companion.

He knew they could not fire a shot without danger of hitting each other.

Grasping the woman about the waist with his left arm, and holding a knife in his right hand, he made a dash through the line of dark forms around him, and made straight for the camp-fire, which was now only fifty yards away.

The woman uttered a sharp cry as she felt herself lifted from the ground.

A faint light from the camp-fire shining through the dark woods made objects dimly visible.

The men in front of Gentry saw the gleam of his knife, and they dodged to each side as he sprang forward with the woman in his arm.

A chorus of curses from the gang answered the cry of the woman.

The dash through the line was so unlooked for that Gentry and his companion were half-way to the camp before the men who had surrounded them recovered from their surprise.

Then a number of pistol shots rang out and bullets whistled through the bushes.

Gentry dropped to the ground to avoid the shots, but he held on to the woman.

Mournful Mary was now fighting like a tigress to free herself from the grip of her captor.

They had reached a small spot of open ground where the moonlight fell clear and bright when the shooting began.

A moment after Gentry had dropped to the ground there was a sound of heavy footsteps close behind.

He leaped to his feet, and drawing a revolver in place of the knife, turned to face the pursuer.

A big man with a heavily bearded face leaped into the little circle of moonlight.

The pistol of Gentry covered him the moment he came into view.

At the same instant the woman succeeded in wrenching herself free from his grasp, and, with a cry of alarm, sprang forward and threw her arms about the neck of the big man.

Her body acted as a shield for him, and Gentry did not fire.

The two men were now less than ten feet apart.

The big fellow, finding himself protected by the woman from the fire of his opponent, raised his own pistol.

Taking quick aim over the shoulder of the woman, he fired full at the breast of Gentleman Joe.

But the Gilt-Edged Sport was not to be fooled so easily.

He dropped to the ground just as the shot rang out, but as he went down he threw himself forward, and his hands reached the ankles of the big man who had attempted his life.

A quick, hard pull, and his assailant, with a howl of rage, toppled over.

The three went down in a heap on the ground, and the woman began to scream at the top of her voice.

This brought all the other members of the gang to the aid of their leader with a rush.

In a moment there was a mass of struggling men rolling and tumbling on the ground.

The members of the gang dared not use their weapons, for fear of killing each other.

In the darkness and confusion it was an easy matter for Gentleman Joe, with his superior strength and skill, to throw off all his assailants and break away clear of the struggling mass.

While the outlaws were trying to extricate themselves, Gentry slipped off, and turned to look for the camp-fire of Major Hays.

The fire had disappeared. Not a trace of the camp or the major could be found in the darkness.

CHAPTER V.

DERRINGER DICK.

Gentleman Joe soon gave up the search for Major Hays, and successfully avoiding the outlaws, returned to his hotel at Frog Back Curve for the night.

He was satisfied by this time that something of his business in the neighborhood was known to the Rocky Rangers and perhaps to others.

But his time was limited.

On the following day he started out in search of the mine which he had been employed to find, determined to pay no further attention to other parties who seemed interested in the same property unless they crossed his path.

Leaving the station at an early hour in the morning, he proceeded direct to the foot-hills, where the mine was supposed to be located.

Gentry spent several hours tramping around through deep canons and up and down narrow ravines, poring into out-of-the-way nooks and corners without finding any trace of the object of his search.

Crossing a ridge that lay between two steep hills near the foot of the mountain range, he found himself in a narrow, wooded ravine which he had not yet explored.

He started up this, and soon began to find traces of gold-bearing quartz.

A little farther on and he found plenty of evidence that miners and prospectors had been at work in the ravine, and proceeded with greater caution, keeping a sharp lookout on all sides to guard against surprise.

After going a mile or more he noticed that the ravine was growing very narrow, and that the hills on either side arose almost perpendicularly to a considerable height.

Indications of rich, gold bearing rock were growing more abundant at every step.

A small but turbulent stream flowed swiftly down the centre of the ravine, and in places the sandy bottom was covered with shining particles of gold dust.

Still he encountered no miners or prospectors, and found no indication that the ravine was inhabited.

Keeping close to the foot of the cliff on the right, he continued his search for the Hamp Hull Mine.

A little farther on, and he discovered a small opening in the side of the cliff.

A pathway leading to it was marked with the imprint of many feet, showing that the opening in the cliff led to an inhabited cave or some underground passage-way.

With a pistol in his hand, Gentry now crept forward with great caution.

Not a sign of life was visible about the opening in the side of the hill.

Looking around to make sure that his movements were not watched, he started to enter the place.

As he took a step forward a long, black arrow came whizzing through the air and fell at his feet.

He glanced hastily around to see if he could discover where it came from, but there was no one in sight.

Then he picked up the arrow, and found rudely carved on its stone point a black skull and cross-bones.

Stepping back into the shadow of the cliff, he stood for several moments awaiting developments.

The silence in the narrow, dimly lighted ravine was oppressive.

For five minutes he waited, and still there was no sign or sound of another human being anywhere around.

Again he advanced toward the opening in the cliff.

This time there was no further warning nor interference.

He found himself on entering the place in a narrow passage-way, the walls, roof and floor, of which were solid rock.

He went forward slowly, until he was beyond the range of the few rays of light that struggled through the opening.

Then finding the darkness so intense that he was compelled to feel his way forward with great caution, he stopped and lighted the pocket-lantern which he always carried.

As he flashed the light upon the walls and the roof of the little tunnel in the hill, he could scarcely repress a cry of astonishment.

The walls and roof gleamed and sparkled with pure gold.

The light of the lantern was reflected back a glowing red.

It was like a scene in fairy-land.

Gentleman Joe had seen many rich mines and much gold-bearing rock, but never before such a mass of the gleaming yellow metal in one small space.

Great jagged holes in the wall and roof of the tunnel showed that some of the gold had been cut away.

But there still remained in sight enough to make a modern Monte Cristo of any miner lucky enough to claim it all for his own.

As Gentry continued to advance, he found that the passage-way was growing more narrow at every step.

But the rich yellow gold still gleamed from every side.

It seemed as if the whole interior of the hill was one solid mass of the rich yellow metal.

Gentry carefully examined every nook and corner of the tunnel, but failed to find any miners' tools or other evidence that the rich mine had been recently worked.

The yellow and sparkling reflection of light that came back from the walls wherever he turned his lantern was beginning to dazzle his eyes.

He turned and retraced his steps to the entrance.

As he stepped out into the open air, Gentleman Joe breathed a sigh of relief.

The sight of so much gold was really oppressive.

He was satisfied now that he had at last found the wonderful Hamp Hull Mine.

Taking a sketch book and pencil from his pocket, he made a rough drawing of the place and the approach thereto.

He was about to start on his return to the station to telegraph to the company that had employed him that he had located the property.

Glancing up the ravine, above the mine, he caught sight of a long rope-ladder hanging down the side of the cliff.

It reached to the bottom of the ravine, and ran straight up to the top of the cliff almost directly above the entrance to the mine.

It was made of two long, strong ropes tied together with smaller cords at intervals, these cords serving as steps or rungs.

The ladder was evidently secured in some substantial manner from the top of the cliff, and was probably used in getting to and from the mine.

Gentleman Joe was greatly puzzled to find such a rich mine unoccupied, and apparently unguarded.

The finding of the rope-ladder added to his perplexity, and for a moment left him undecided what to do.

He did not believe it possible that the parties working the mines would remain long away from it.

They had left no notice of any kind to indicate their ownership, and the first prospector who discovered it would have the right to plant his stakes and call the property his own.

Gentry walked a little way up the ravine, scanning the ground closely at the foot of the cliff, then crossed over and came down on the other side.

In this way he made a complete circuit around the entrance to the mine.

The only foot-prints he could find were those leading from the bottom of the rope-ladder.

This satisfied him that the rich mass of gold was reached by those working it by climbing down these ropes from the cliff above.

If he could remove the ladder, perhaps the mine would be still unguarded, when he could return with a force to take possession in behalf of the company which had purchased the property.

The only way to do this was to climb up the ladder to the top of the cliff, and then cut it loose or else pull it up after him and take it away.

Gentry had not forgotten the black arrow.

While he was unable to see or hear any one, he could not overcome a feeling that hidden eyes were watching his every movement.

But standing there thinking it over would accomplish nothing, and time was precious.

He must act, and act at once.

Without further hesitation, he began climbing hand over hand up the rope ladder.

When half-way up he stopped, looked up to the top of the cliff, and down into the ravine below.

There was no sign of life anywhere.

He resumed his climbing and hurried upward as fast as possible.

He was within ten feet of the top of the cliff when the sharp cracking of a twig caused him to stop suddenly and look upward.

The face of a man was peering at him over the edge of the cliff.

The fellow was evidently lying flat down on the rock above, and only his head and face were visible to the man suspended on the ladder.

The face was that of a young man, but the thin lips and keen, piercing eyes warned Gentleman Joe that he had a desperate character to deal with.

"It is a long climb," said the man on the cliff, in a voice as soft and low as that of a woman.

"Rather, but it is almost finished now," responded Gentleman Joe, as he moved a step higher up.

The man above laughed softly.

"Yes, the finish will be rapid," he said.

Gentry made no reply, but cautiously moved up another step.

"Would you prefer to jump, or to fall?" asked the man on the cliff, in a bantering tone.

At this Gentry shot a swift glance down at the ravine below.

He was hanging suspended nearly two hundred feet above the ground.

"I prefer to reach the top," he answered, as he looked up to the top of the cliff.

The man lying on top of the cliff by the side of the rope-ladder, was laughing again, but his voice this time sounded harsh and cruel.

"I am afraid you won't make it," he said, and Gentry, glancing up again, saw the gleam of an uplifted knife.

The man above was going to cut the rope and let him drop to the ravine below.

There was no time for parley now.

Holding the ladder with his left hand, and with his feet firmly braced on the rung, Gentry snatched a pistol from his belt as quick as lightning.

He had lost precious time by taking the momentary glance down at the ravine below.

The man on the cliff lay close beside the rope-ladder.

The knife flashed in the sunlight, and as Gentry raised his pistol, he felt the ladder give way with a sudden jerk that came near throwing him headlong down the side of the cliff.

One side of the ladder had been cut from its fastening above.

But the other side still held firm.

Again the knife was uplifted.

Crack!

The report of Gentry's pistol rang out with a roar that awoke the sleeping echoes for miles up and down the narrow ravine.

He heard a sharp cry of pain from the man above, and then a long, keen-bladed knife dropped down, narrowly missing his head.

He ducked just in time, and the weapon, striking a projecting rock in the side of the cliff a few feet below, bounded far out into the air and fell harmlessly to the ground.

The ladder held by only one rope was beginning to swing back and forth under the weight of the Gilt-Edged Sport.

Thrusting the hammer of his pistol into his mouth, he held the weapon in his teeth, and a few quick strong pulls hand over hand brought him within reach of the top of the cliff.

The ropes forming the sides of the ladder had been tied to iron pins driven deep into the solid rock.

Throwing up his hand, Gentry reached one of these irons, and with a strong pull, swung himself safely on top of the cliff.

The man who had attempted to cut the rope, had jumped to his feet, and was standing a few paces away with blood trickling from his right arm, which had been hit by the bullet from Gentry's pistol.

"You are a quick shot," said the fellow, whose face was pale with rage and pain.

As Gentry rose to his feet, the man in front of him sprang at him like a wild-cat, intending to hurl him over the edge of the precipice.

Gentleman Joe saw the movement in time, and, ducking quickly, caught the fellow about the waist in a vise-like grip.

He lifted him in his arms, and, turning toward the cliff, raised him up and drew back to throw him over.

He expected to hear a wild cry for mercy now that the tables were turned, but the man in his arms remained silent.

For a moment Gentry hesitated.

Twice this man had attempted his life, and the first attempt had come dangerously near being successful.

There was no reason why he should be merciful, but the Gilt-Edged Sport had never yet taken human life when he could avoid it.

He hesitated a moment, and then, turning abruptly away from the cliff, he hurled the fellow to the ground with such force that he lay for several minutes stunned and senseless.

When he came to, the young man sat up and looked at Gentry with an expression of surprise on his thin white face.

"What are you waiting for? Why don't you throw me over?" he asked, in a quiet tone.

"I am not going to throw you over, although I suppose I ought to," responded Gentry.

"Of course you ought," the fellow replied, in a matter-of-fact tone. "I played my cards and lost. When you won the turn, I expected no mercy."

"I do not kill men when I can help it. What is your name?"

"My real one I have not used in so long I have almost forgotten it. People call me Derringer Dick."

"How did you get that name?"

"Because I was handy in the use of a derringer."

"I suspected that, as I see you have your hand on one now, and you probably think you have the drop on me." Derringer Dick laughed, and slowly took his hands from his pockets.

"You are too quick for me," he said, with a shake of his head.

"What is your game?"

"I am not playing now. You hold the deck. I was left to watch the mine, but it seems my watching did not amount to much."

"You mean the Hamp Hull Mine?"

"I suppose it is known by that name."

"What do you know about it? You owe me your life, and you are still in my power. You have a chance to make a friend of me."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Tell me all you know about this mine."

"That would be almost nothing. I have been here only a little while myself."

"Where did you come from?"

"You seem like a square fellow, so I do not mind telling you something of my history. As you say, I am in your power, and it won't make it any worse for me, I reckon."

"Go ahead with anything you want to say."

"I am Derringer Dick, from the mining camp of Red Quartz. I had some trouble over there, and my derringers went off while two men were standing in front of me. The vigilantes have been after me ever since. I am hiding here like a wild animal. I fell in with a gang, and they promised to protect me if I would do what they wanted. The hand of every honest man is against me, and I suppose my time will come pretty soon. All I ask is an open fight and a chance to die with my boots on."

"What do you know of the gang that you are now working for?"

"They are a bad lot. That's about all that I know of them."

"Why don't you get away from them?"

"Where would I go?"

"If you want to do me a service, I may arrange to give you a chance."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to find out all about this gang and the rich mine in the ravine below."

"You want me to work in with them and report to you?"

"Yes."

"I am afraid I could not do that. They watch me too close, and my life would not be worth a copper if they even suspected me."

Gentry started to explain to Derringer Dick what he wanted him to do.

The explanation was interrupted almost as soon as begun.

From the wooded hill back of where the two men were standing, came a long, shrill cry.

Derringer Dick leaped to his feet.

"They are coming! You had better go!" he exclaimed.

"You mean the gang?"

"Yes, and go at once. You have no time to lose."

"Which way shall I go to avoid them?"

"There is only one way. Down the ladder and through the ravine."

Gentry shook his head with a grim smile.

"I will not walk into a trap with my eyes open," he replied, quietly.

Derringer Dick sprang forward, and, catching up the rope he had cut with his knife a few minutes before, he rapidly re-fastened it to the iron stake in the rock, and in a few moments the ladder was secured so that it was impossible to tell there had been any break in it.

Then, turning to Gentry, he said, quietly:

"I will go down first if you are afraid to trust me."

For a moment the Gilt-Edged Sport hesitated.

Derringer Dick, looking him straight in the face, said:

"I attempted your life and failed. You saved mine, and I was in your power. Derringer Dick has never yet broken his word. You will be safe to go down the ladder."

Gentry realized that he could trust the word of the outlaw.

He dropped over the edge of the cliff, swung himself down the ladder, and reached the bottom in safety.

CHAPTER VI.

A DUEL IN THE DARK.

By the time Gentleman Joe reached the bottom of the rope-ladder he was in doubt as to whether or not he had done the right thing under the circumstances.

His natural love of excitement and adventure had suggested at first that he ought to stay and meet the band who were in possession of the rich gold mine.

But realizing that he owed a duty to the men who had employed him, he decided that it would be better not to take too many chances until he had reported to the company the result of his investigation.

It was late in the afternoon when Gentry returned to the ravine, and, without waiting to make any further examination of the gold mine, he started back to the station to send in his report.

The sun was down before he had gone a mile, and the brief twilight had changed to darkness when he passed out of the ravine and got fairly started on his return journey.

He did not mind the darkness, however, because by this time he had become pretty familiar with the surrounding country.

Striking out straight across the hills, for the railroad station he proceeded for a mile without incident.

Emerging from a little stretch of dense forest, he came upon a camp-fire located in an open space near a spring of clear water.

He was almost upon the camp before he saw it, and finding that it was not closely guarded, he walked straight forward toward the light.

As he boldly approached the fire, four men who had been lying on the ground, wrapped in their blankets, sprang up and confronted him.

Before they were fairly on their feet, Gentleman Joe had recognized one of them as Major Hays, of Denver.

The men had drawn their weapons, but seeing that the new-comer was alone and apparently on a peaceful mis-

sion, they put them away again.

"Pardon me if I am intruding," said Gentry, quietly. "Your camp-fire happens to be directly in my path, and so I thought I would pay my respects in passing."

Major Hays stepped forward, and looked the new-comer over critically.

"I have seen you before, young man, if I am not mistaken," said the major.

"You have," replied Gentry. "I met you at the train the day you arrived in this country."

"Oh, yes. I remember now. You are the man who warned me about the gold mine."

"And also about the men who were going to sell it to you."

"Precisely, and I owe you an apology."

"Then you have found that I was right?"

"Well, I found the men who wanted to sell me a mine were a pretty tough lot."

"How about the mine?"

"I have not found that."

"Do you expect to find it?"

"Certainly, that is what I came here for."

"How did you escape from the Rocky Rangers?"

"I arrived before they expected me, and when they found that I had brought some men with me they were afraid to show their hand openly. But I have seen and heard enough of them to convince me that they are a lot of cut-throats and robbers."

"You are in luck to escape with your money and your life."

"I guess you are right. They made an attack on our camp last night."

"It was only an accident that they did not get the best of you then."

"How do you know that?"

"I was there."

The major looked at Gentry in a surprised and startled way.

"You do not mean to say that you are a member of the gang, do you?"

"Decidedly not."

"And how did you happen to be there?"

"I told you that was an accident. You heard the shots, I suppose?"

"We did, sir, and the whistle of the bullets. That is why we broke camp so hurriedly."

"Well, those shots were fired at me, not at you."

"Then they are after you?"

"Well, they imagine that I am in their way."

"May I ask your name, young man?"

"I am Joseph Gentry, sometimes called Gentleman Joe."

The major, with a smile, advanced and extended his hand.

"I am very glad to meet you," he said. "Your name is known throughout the West. You are a very brave man."

"How long do you intend to remain in this locality?"

"Until I find the property known as the Hamp Hull Mine."

"So that is the claim you are after?"

"It is."

"Well, you might as well return to Denver at once. You are too late to find it."

"What do you mean?"

"The property has been purchased by others, and has already been located."

"How do you know this?"

"It is a part of my business to know it."

"Young man, you talk in riddles."

"I have told you the truth. Once before I gave you some good advice, and you would not listen to it. This time you can believe me or not. It is a matter of indifference to me."

"Well, suppose I do not believe you?"

"Then all I have to add is that it will be well for you to get out of this locality as quickly as possible if you value your life and your money."

"Do you mean that as a threat?"

"I never make threats. I simply warn you that these hills are infested with dangerous and desperate outlaws. Some of them know that you are here, and that you have money, and they will camp on your trail until they find

you."

"I am not to be frightened away by such talk. I have a war record. I led my command in fifty battles, and never yet ran away from a fight."

"I have no wish to frighten you. I am telling you facts; you can act as you see fit."

"I shall remain until I locate the property I came here to look for."

"And I repeat that you will never find that, or if you do find it, you cannot get possession of it, because it has been purchased by others."

"I must refuse to accept your advice or your warnings."

"Then I have nothing to say, except to bid you good-night."

As Gentry spoke he turned on his heel and walked rapidly away.

He was convinced that Major Hays was one of those stubborn, self-willed men who would take his life in his hands rather than listen to advice or warning from another.

He determined to leave the major and his companions to find out for themselves the dangers that surrounded them.

Gentry hurried on because he wanted to reach the station in time to send a telegram that night.

A mile beyond the camp of Major Hays he heard again the strains of a violin.

The mysterious fiddler of the deserted cabin was this time playing a lively air.

Gentleman Joe had no time to lose, but, acting on a sudden impulse, he decided to make a further investigation of this lone cabin in the hill, and this time he would attempt to find the man who played the violin.

There was just a little moonlight by this time, and it was possible to distinguish objects at a short distance.

In a few moments the hut where he had first met the Rocky Rangers loomed into view.

The violin player was plying his bow faster and faster, and the night air seemed to quiver and vibrate in response to the strains of the music.

This time Gentry did not walk straight up to the door of the cabin as he had done before.

Making a short detour to the left, he approached the structure from the rear.

The music within continued without interruption until he was within fifty feet of the building, when it ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

The Gilt-Edged Sport stood still and listened for several moments, but not a sound of any description came from the interior of the rude hut.

Then he decided that it was useless to waste any more time that night, and started back to the trail which he had left ten minutes before.

As he came around the end of the cabin, a tall, dark form loomed into view on the other side.

At the same instant the sharp report of a pistol rang out and a bullet whistled close by his head.

He sprang back into the shadow of the cabin, and, drawing his own weapon, returned the fire.

But at the same moment his opponent dodged, and leaping to one side, disappeared around the corner of the little structure.

For several moments Gentry stood and listened intently.

Not a sound broke the stillness of the night. Holding his pistol ready for instant use, he began to creep cautiously around the end of the building in search of the man who had made the attempt on his life.

He had advanced but a few feet when the sound of a stealthy footstep behind him caused him to turn quickly.

His opponent had slipped around the cabin on the other side, and was coming up behind him.

As Gentry turned around, the two men came face to face in the darkness. They were not more than ten feet apart, and each one could see the form of the other quite plainly.

Quick as lightning, two pistols were raised, two flashes of fire lighted up the darkness for one brief instant, and the reports of the two weapons sounded as one.

As Gentry fired, he dodged to the left, and again the bullet of his opponent whistled harmlessly past his head.

But to his surprise, his own aim was apparently no better than that of his opponent.

The latter jumped back into the shadow on the other side of the cabin and it was evident from his movements that he was unhurt.

The circling around the structure began again.

The duel in the dark was now becoming a game of hide and seek.

Gentry made one or two ineffectual attempts to turn the corners first, and get the drop on his opponent, but the latter evidently suspected his intentions, and kept well in the shadow.

Then the Gilt-Edged Sport tried a new move which was more successful in bringing about the second exchange of shots.

Backing up against the wall as closely as possible, at the end of the cabin that was in shadow, he waited for the other man to turn the corner.

He did not have long to wait.

In a few moments the tall dark form loomed into view again.

Once more the report of the two pistols rang out together.

Again the two shots went wild.

Gentleman Joe decided to take a desperate chance of ending the duel quickly.

He sprang forward toward his opponent who immediately leaped back to the other side of the cabin without waiting to fire again.

As Gentry turned the corner he caught a fleeting glimpse of his opponent disappearing through the open door of the crumbling little building.

Then followed the sound of a bolt shot back, a quick closing of a door, and all was still within.

Gentry knew from past experience that there was some secret exit from this tumble-down little structure, and he did not attempt to follow the man.

The duel in the dark had been exciting enough while it lasted but it was without result.

He had already wasted considerable valuable time, and now resumed his journey toward Frog Back Curve.

He had gone but a short distance when he heard the sound of rapid firing in the direction of the camp of Major Hank Hays.

While he stopped to listen it occurred to him that the war-like major was by this time probably beginning to realize that it would have been well for him to listen to practical advice.

The firing continued for several minutes, and Gentry was convinced that the outlaws under cover of darkness had made a determined attack on the major and his little party.

Gentry knew that the latter would not be able to hold out long without assistance.

As the firing continued, he promptly decided to go to their rescue.

He turned and ran back as fast as possible in the direction of the camp, the light of which was still dimly visible through the intervening trees.

He had gone but a short distance when the sound of the firing ceased as suddenly as it had begun.

But Gentry pushed on all the faster, determined to learn the fate of the major and his party, even if he was too late to be of assistance to them.

In five minutes he was within two hundred yards of the camp.

The fire was still burning brightly, but when he came in sight of the place it seemed to be deserted.

Major Hays and his men had disappeared.

"They have been killed or captured," was the inward comment of Gentleman Joe, as he started to creep forward cautiously.

The shooting had stopped so suddenly, and the men who had been engaged in the fight had disappeared so quickly, the whole affair seemed a trifle suspicious.

There was not a sign of life about the place.

Gentry was certain, however, that the major and his party had not been killed.

If they had fallen, the outlaws would not have taken the trouble to remove the bodies.

A hasty examination of the ground around the camp-fire revealed no sign of blood.

The fight had evidently been a bloodless one, whatever the final result.

Gentry was puzzled by the situation, but he was angry and impatient at the useless delays to which he had been subjected, and with a few quiet, but uncomplimentary, remarks about the fighting major, he again turned to resume his journey.

He had taken less than a dozen steps when, like magic, a score of forms rose out of the darkness around the camp-fire, and a harsh voice ordered him to halt.

The Gilt-Edged Sport saw that he was surrounded on every side.

There was but one chance of escape, and that was a desperate one.

Gentry, however, did not hesitate to take it.

He was accustomed to desperate chances, and this time he was just in the humor for a fight.

He held his pistols in his hands, and, raising them quickly, he fired half a dozen shots at the men who stood in his way.

Two of them went down with yells of pain, and the whole line was thrown into confusion.

Gentry ran forward as he fired, and before the gang had recovered from their confusion, he had safely crossed the line.

He dashed away in the darkness as they recovered their presence of mind and opened fire on him.

But their shots went wide of the mark.

Gentry ran about thirty yards beyond the line to a point where he was out of range of the light of the camp-fire, and then turning around, he fired a few parting shots at the startled outlaws.

They did not attempt to follow him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADOWS OF THE FOOT-HILLS.

Major Hank Hays had arrived at Frog Back Curve before Con Conway, the tricky villain of the Rocky Rangers, was quite ready to receive him.

The major coming unexpectedly, and bringing with him three old frontiersmen, who were mining experts, had quite disconcerted the men who were going, as they thought, to sell him a salted mine.

The result was that the actions of the Rocky Rangers aroused the suspicions of the major, and he promptly gave them to understand that he would have nothing more to do with them or their mine.

Then he started out to search for the Hamp Hull Mine on his own account.

He had heard some of the stories of that mysterious deposit of rich gold, and determined to find it if possible.

Mike Molony and his men were furious when they found that the major and his money were about to slip from their grasp.

The chief of the Rocky Rangers was determined to have the money by fair means or foul.

The visit of Major Hays to the headquarters of the outlaws was made late in the afternoon.

As he was unacquainted with the country, he found it impossible to return to the station that night without the services of a guide, so he decided to camp in the hills until morning, and then begin his search for the rich gold mine that had so aroused his cupidity as to make him willing to take desperate chances to get possession of it.

It was, of course, by the direction of the chief of the Rocky Rangers that the woman, Mournful Mary, had gone to Frog Back Curve to entice Gentleman Joe into the foot-hills, where the outlaws hoped to get him into their power.

But the leader of the Rocky Rangers had not counted on failure to make a deal with Major Hays, and he had not expected the major and Gentry to follow each other so closely.

Exasperated by their failure to get the ten thousand dollars which they had reason to believe Major Hays had brought with him, by selling him a bogus mine, the Rocky Rangers had determined to get the cash by other means.

As soon as they found the prospector from Denver and

his men in camp, they prepared to surround them and take the money by force if necessary.

They were moving down on the camp when the unexpected arrival of Mournful Mary and Gentleman Joe interfered with their plans.

When the Gilt-Edged Sport made his escape that night from the mass of struggling outlaws, Mike Molony was in a furious temper.

At the sound of the firing which had resulted from the unexpected meeting, Major Hays and his men had taken alarm, and, putting out their camp-fire, escaped in the darkness.

When the chief of the Rocky Rangers found that the two men who seemed to stand between him and a fortune had both escaped from his grasp without much apparent effort on their part, he was wild with rage.

Turning fiercely to the woman, who had been willing to risk her own life to save his, he demanded, with a terrible oath:

"Why did you bring him here?"

"I could not help it," replied Mournful Mary, meekly, for she was trembling with fright.

"You lie! You are trying to play me false!" cried the outlaw chief, fiercely.

"I am not. I tell you I could not help it."

"Why couldn't you help it? Why didn't you take him around some other way when you saw the camp-fire?"

"I did try, but he suspected something wrong, and forced me to come straight toward the light."

"I do not believe you."

"You know I am telling the truth—I have done all that I could."

"You have turned traitor, you wretch!" cried Molony, as he sprang at the woman like a wild animal.

Seizing her by the throat, he hurled her to the ground with stunning force.

The members of the gang stood by, and for a moment none of them dared to interfere.

The big chief was now like a raging madman.

Planting one knee on the breast of the fallen woman, his big, rough hands closed over her throat with a vise-like grip.

He would have strangled her to death in a few moments, but the woman had one friend in the gang, and he interfered just in time.

Dinky Dobbins, the hunchback, with a fierce cry of rage, snatched a long, keen-bladed knife from his belt and sprang at the big outlaw.

"Back, you coward!" he cried.

Molony relaxed his grasp from the throat of the woman and looked up in surprise.

"Who dares interfere?" he thundered.

"I do!" replied Dobbins, as he stepped between the leader of the band and the woman, who still lay prostrate on the ground.

"You, you hunchbacked wretch!" cried Molony, as he reached for a weapon.

"Yes, I dare to interfere to save a woman," replied the hunchback, with more spirit than he had ever shown before.

Molony drew his pistol, but he did not use it.

Like a flash, the little hunchback leaped forward with his knife raised above his head.

His face was white, and his little bead-like black eyes flashed fire.

In a moment the long knife which he held would have been buried in the breast of the outlaw chief.

In the nick of time, Con Conway jumped between the two.

Then, turning to the leader of the gang, he said, sternly:

"Come, Mike, this has gone far enough."

There was a fierce, angry scowl on the face of the leader, but he put up his pistol.

He did not care to force the fight to the finish with Dinky Dobbins, who, now thoroughly aroused, would have died in defense of Mournful Mary.

She was the only one connected with the gang who had ever spoken kindly to him.

Desperate outlaw that he was, and trained to crime from boyhood, there was still a soft spot in his nature which could be reached by kindness alone.

In many ways the little hunchback was the most useful member of the gang, and as his anger began to cool, Molony was glad that the conflict had ended where it did.

Mournful Mary arose with an effort when she saw that Dinky Dobbins had come to her rescue.

Her throat was bruised and swollen where the big fingers of the outlaw chief had closed over it.

She had received such treatment before from Molony, but this time there was a fierce and revengeful gleam in her eyes that boded ill for him if ever the opportunity came for her to be revenged.

Thanking the hunchback briefly for his brave stand in her defense, the woman turned and disappeared in the darkness.

When the excitement of the thrilling events of the evening had subsided, the Rocky Rangers returned to their hiding-place in the hills for the night, determined to hunt down the major on the following day.

But next day they had no better success.

They spent the time in a search through the foot-hills, but did not even find a trail of the major and his party.

When Mournful Mary had left the gang the night before, she went straight to the stone hut on the hill and locked herself in her own room.

Next day she kept out of the way of the outlaw chief, and refused to receive any message from him.

At sundown that day the Rocky Rangers met by appointment at a rendezvous in the hills, intending to make a night search for the camp of the major and his prospecting party.

The last two members of the gang to arrive at the meeting place were Dinky Dobbins and Con Conway.

Both brought important news.

The hunchback had at last found the trail of the major, and came in with a report that the man whose money they were after had gone into camp for the night less than two miles away.

The news brought by Con Conway greatly disturbed the leader of the gang.

His report was to the effect that Gentleman Joe was again prowling about the hills.

Molony called Conway to one side, and the two held a long consultation.

At the end of it, the chief gave directions that the members of the gang, with Dinky Dobbins acting as guide, were to surround the camp of Major Hays, and take him prisoner at all hazards.

Then, calling Black Joe, the fiddler, aside, Molony sent him to the stone hut with a message for Mournful Mary.

He asked the woman to meet him at the deserted cabin as quickly as possible, as he wanted to see her on a matter of importance.

His message was accompanied with a threat that if she failed to comply she would be regarded as a traitor to the gang.

The big outlaw was tired of the woman who had been so faithful to him, and who had more than once saved his life, but he had important work for her to do.

He was going to make one more attempt to get Gentleman Joe into his power.

Black Joe was to deliver the message, then hasten back to the lone hut on the hill-side, where he was to play his violin as a signal to the outlaw chief that the woman would come.

That was how it happened that Molony arrived at the cabin that night a few moments in advance of Gentleman Joe, who had come to investigate the mystery of the violin playing in such an out-of-the-way place.

It was the outlaw chief who fought the duel in the dark with the Gilt-Edged Sport.

Again the man from Denver had been able to thwart the plans of the chief of the Rocky Rangers, but this time he had done so unconsciously.

The sound of the firing prevented a meeting between Molony and Mournful Mary.

The shots were also heard by Major Hays and his men in their camp, and the sound put them on their guard.

When the attack of the outlaw gang followed a little later, they were prepared for it.

They had concealed themselves in a clump of bushes

back from the camp-fire, and at the first approach of the outlaws, they opened the firing.

Nearly a hundred shots had been exchanged without doing any damage on either side.

Then the major, finding his forces so greatly outnumbered, like the skilful soldier that he was, retreated in good order.

He slipped away with his men so quietly the outlaws did not know they were gone.

The latter, under the lead of Con Conway, as soon as the firing ceased, proceeded to carry out the original plan of surrounding the camp.

They had just completed their line, when Gentleman Joe unexpectedly broke through it.

His coming disconcerted them for a moment, but when Con Conway recognized him, the acting leader of the outlaws swore that this time the man of nerve should not escape them.

How easily Gentleman Joe got away, the reader already knows.

Molony, after his escape through the secret passage-way from the cabin on the hill-side, heard the sound of the firing, and, believing that his men had been successful in their raid, hurried away to join them.

When he met them returning and learned that both the men who stood in the way of his making a fortune had again escaped, his rage knew no bounds.

He cursed the members of the gang individually and collectively until muttered threats of rebellion from some of the men warned him that he had better not carry the matter too far.

When he had cooled down somewhat, it was agreed to wait for daylight before making another move.

By the time the outlaws were ready to return to their hiding-place in the hills for the night the moon had climbed high in the sky, and was shining brightly.

By its light, it was easy to follow the trail, and objects were visible some distance away.

It was a disappointed, dejected, and discouraged band of men who turned from the scene of their last defeat and wended their way slowly across the rugged hill to the stone hut in the cave where they spent their nights and many of their days hiding from the sight of honest men.

They walked along in silence, traveling in single file, with the chief in the lead, while Black Joe, the fiddler, and Dinky Dobbins, the hunchback, brought up the rear.

They crossed one range of low hills, passed over a bit of open tableland, and had started down into a narrow valley where there were patches of timber here and there on both sides of the trail.

They were moving down the hill-side at a good pace when Molony suddenly leaped to one side, and with an oath stopped short.

A small black object had come hurtling through the moonlit air, and struck the ground almost at his feet with a thud.

The outlaw chief turned and picked up another of the black arrows which had been used once before to convey to him a warning.

For a moment he stood irresolute as the members of the gang gathered around him to learn what had happened.

"Good Lawdy, Cap'n Mike! look dar!"

It was the trembling voice of Black Joe that spoke, and, looking in the direction in which he was pointing, the outlaw saw half a score of long black shadows stealing across the trail from a patch of timber a hundred yards ahead in the misty moonlight, looking neither like men nor animals.

They seemed to be tall, black, spook-like forms, that moved with a slow, rhythmic motion, as if they were gliding through the air rather than walking upon the earth.

The teeth of Black Joe were now chattering with terror, and the faces of many members of the gang looked white and drawn in the moonlight.

"What does it mean?" asked Con Conway, in a low tone, turning to the leader of the gang.

The voice of Mike Molony trembled slightly as he replied:

"It's too much for me, Con. I give it up."

"I don't believe in spooks. You can't have a shadow without a substance," replied Conway, who was the coolest man in the crowd.

"I reckon you are right about that, Con, but they are queer-looking specimens."

"Suppose we try the effect of a few bullets on them?"

"It won't do any harm. Fire on them, boys."

But as the outlaw chief gave the command the black shadows departed as silently as they had come.

The gang stood still, watching the trail ahead for several minutes, but they did not reappear.

Then the outlaws resumed their march, but they kept a sharp lookout ahead as well as on both sides.

They had passed safely beyond the patch of timber from whence the shadows had first appeared, and had begun to breathe easy again.

Suddenly Black Joe, who had again fallen behind with his friend, Dinky Dobbins, the hunchback, uttered a wild cry of terror and ran down the line of men to the side of Molony as fast as he could go.

Looking back to see what had frightened the negro, the outlaws saw the same silent black shadows crossing the trail behind them.

The sight came near throwing them into a panic this time.

Con Conway, the only one who had remained cool and kept his wits about him, raised his rifle and fired three or four shots at the shadows in rapid succession.

If there was substance behind those shadows, his bullets went wide of the mark.

The tall black figures moved along with the same slow, regular motion, and soon disappeared into the woods on the right of the trail.

Conway proposed that they surround the patch of timber and see if they could not clear up the mystery of the black shadows.

But even Mike Molony, the leader of the gang, hesitated to follow this suggestion.

The other members of the gang were too frightened to think of such a thing.

All the gold in the hills would not have induced them to enter the dark woods into which these strange shadows had apparently been swallowed up.

"There is a trick of some kind in this, and we ought to find out what it is," insisted Conway.

"We'd better get away from hyah 'fore da eats us alive!" wailed Black Joe, who looked as if he were about to go into paroxysms of terror.

This suggestion seemed to meet with the approval of the gang, and again they resumed their journey.

This time they kept close together, and moved forward rapidly.

They had half a mile of open ground to cross before they would come to any more timber.

The moon was still shining brightly, and they could see every object plainly, except in the shadow of the timber.

The open ground was crossed without incident, and beyond the next patch of timber the trail would turn to the left up the hill, near the top of which was their hiding-place.

The Rocky Rangers were within one hundred yards of the last bit of timber which they had to pass when a small black object came flying through the air close above their heads and struck the ground ten yards beyond them.

It had come from the direction of the woods in their front.

Con Conway ran back and picked up another of the black arrows.

They started forward again without waiting to make a careful examination of the arrow, but they had gone less than fifty yards when the black shadows once more appeared in their front.

As before, they were simply moving slowly and silently across the trail.

This time several members of the gang turned to beat a retreat.

But with low cries of terror, they turned back in a moment and huddled around their leader.

Coming down the trail behind them, and not more than two hundred yards away, were more of the shadows.

Finding themselves surrounded, the terror-stricken outlaws prepared to fight their ghostly looking enemies.

At the suggestion of Conway, shots were fired in both directions at once.

The result was startling.

As the reports of the rifles rang out, the black shadows vanished as suddenly as they had appeared.

Then the outlaws, not waiting for a command from their leader, lost no time in getting away.

Keeping to the trail, they ran as fast as their legs could carry them, and did not stop until they reached the stone hut on top of the hill.

There, gasping for breath after his long, hard race, Mike Molony turned to Dinky Dobbins and asked:

"What are they?"

"They are the Shadows of the Hills, so-called," replied Dobbins.

"Are they men or spooks?"

"No one has yet been able to find out."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SECRET OF THE MINE.

Gentleman Joe, after his encounter with the Rocky Rangers, succeeded in reaching Frog Back Curve just in time to send a dispatch to the company by which he was employed, telling them briefly that he had found the mine.

Then he went to his hotel, and after writing a letter, giving full details of his investigation, he went to bed and slept soundly until morning.

Bright and early on the following day he was back in the foot-hills of the Rockies to make a further investigation of the rich deposit of gold.

He had almost reached the entrance to the ravine in which the Hamp Hull Mine was located when he heard the sound of rifle shots.

Far up on the hill to his right and front there was a desultory firing.

He stopped for a few moments to await developments, and soon discovered that the firing was coming closer.

The men who were doing the shooting were evidently in pursuit of some one.

Nearer and nearer sounded the ringing reports of repeating rifles.

The Gilt-Edged Sport stepped behind a tree and awaited the oncoming of the running fight.

A few moments later he saw a slender young man coming down the hill running at full speed.

The fugitive would occasionally glance back over his shoulder and then dash ahead faster than before.

The occasion of his wild race was soon apparent.

A hundred yards behind him came a score of rough-looking men, all well mounted and armed with repeating rifles.

They were on the trail of the fugitive, and were firing at him every time they caught a glimpse of his fleeing form.

As the fugitive came closer, Gentry recognized Derringer Dick.

The young outlaw was coming straight toward him. Gentry waited until the fellow was almost abreast of him, and then stepping from from his hiding-place, he asked:

"What is the trouble?"

The young outlaw came to a sudden stop, and, throwing up his left hand, leveled a short derringer pistol at the man who stood in his path.

Then a look of recognition suddenly flashed across his face, and he lowered his weapon.

"It's you, is it?" he gasped, for he was almost out of breath after his long race for life.

"It is. What is the trouble with you?"

"They are after me," replied Derringer Dick, with an anxious look back over his shoulder.

"Who are they?"

"The vigilantes from the Red Quartz mining camp."

"Are you hit?"

"Not yet, but they are getting my range."

"Wait until they come up, and I will see what I can do to help you out of your trouble."

"You can do nothing. They will stretch my neck if they get their hands on me."

The fugitive had been dodging from side to side among the trees, and his pursuers had for the time lost sight of him.

This threw them off the trail, and delayed them for several minutes until they could find it again.

Derringer Dick, who could see that they were puzzled, improved the time to get breath and a fresh burst of speed.

Gentleman Joe knew that the fellow was a blood-thirsty outlaw and murderer, but he could not repress a feeling of sympathy at sight of a human being flying like a hunted animal in a race which meant life or death.

It was not altogether a selfish motive which induced the Gilt-Edged Sport to propose to the fugitive one more chance for his life.

"You may not deserve it," he said, turning to the outlaw, "but I have a proposition to make to you which if you accept may give you a chance of escape."

"Well make it quick. Those devils will be on my trail again in a moment."

"You know something of the secret of that mine in the ravine?"

"Very little."

"Tell me what you know, and tell the truth, and I will help you."

"How can you help me? There are twenty to two."

"Never mind how. I'll keep my word. Will you tell me what you know?"

"Yes, you are welcome to all I can tell you."

"Then tell it quick—you have no time to lose."

"Hamp Hull, the man who discovered the mine, is still alive."

"I suspected as much."

"He is working it with the aid of the worst band of cut-throats that ever got together."

"Is there more than one entrance to the place?"

"Yes; follow the tunnel—it passes under the hill and opens into a small valley beyond."

"Where is the hiding-place of the gang?"

"They have a dozen. They lurk about the hills and ravines in disguise. The mine is always guarded."

"What is their disguise?"

"Some spook-like arrangement in which they are known as the Shadows of the Hills."

"Is that all you know?"

"That is all. Success to you."

As Derringer Dick spoke, a shout from the band of vigilantes told they had again found his trail.

"Go!" said Gentleman Joe; "I will detain them here until you can double on your trail and make your escape."

With a word of thanks, Derringer Dick dashed away, and in a moment was out of sight in the forest.

He had barely disappeared when the band of vigilantes came riding down upon Gentleman Joe.

A score of rifles were leveled at the Gilt-Edged Sport, and half as many voices ordered him to throw up his hands.

He leaned against a tree, and without a word or a motion to obey the command, put up his hands, and waited for the vigilantes to come up.

"Have you seen him?" demanded the leader.

"Seen who?"

"Derringer Dick, the outlaw."

"I am a stranger in this locality," replied Gentry, slowly.

He was playing for time.

"Who are you?" demanded the captain of the vigilantes, fiercely.

"I am a prospector, a new-comer in this locality."

"And you have seen nothing of a man running past here?"

"Come to think of it, I believe I did see a man running through the woods ten minutes ago."

"Where? Which way did he go? Where is he?", demanded the vigilantes, in chorus.

"Why, I think he went over that way," replied Gentleman Joe, pointing in a direction different from that taken by Derringer Dick.

"Well, stranger, if you want a hand in a lynching bee, come along with us."

"Thank you, but I do not care to take part."

Without more ado, the band of horsemen rode rapidly away in the direction pointed out to them by Gentry.

The latter stood and watched until they were out of sight.

Then he knew that Derringer Dick was safe for the present.

He had some doubt as to whether or not he had done right to interfere with what might be well-merited justice, but the Gilt-Edged Sport did not have the heart to stand by and see a human being hunted down and killed like a dog without a chance for his life.

It was without a feeling of regret for his action that he turned and resumed his journey toward the gold mine.

The ravine was as silent and apparently as deserted when he entered it as it was the day before when he had been successful in locating the claim for which he had been searching.

But after the warning of Derringer Dick, that the place was never left unguarded, he proceeded with great caution.

He reached the entrance to the mine without having encountered any member of the desperate band which held possession of the property.

Again he found the place deserted, and advanced some distance without finding any sign of life.

He had gone somewhat farther into the passage-way than he had advanced on the day before, yet the farther he went the richer seemed the vast deposit of gold in the walls and roof of the tunnel.

Half a mile beyond the entrance, he came to a large room which seemed to have been hollowed out by nature on one side of the passage.

Here he found plenty of evidence that the place had been occupied by the men in possession of the mine.

The floor of the cave was covered with furs and blankets. Scattered about were miners' tools, weapons of various kinds, cooking utensils, and a small supply of food.

Gentry was surprised to find this place deserted.

The underground room was so situated that a small band of men well armed could hold it against an army.

Entrance to it could be had only through the passage-way, which was so narrow that two men could not walk abreast.

He examined the contents of the room thoroughly without finding any clew to the identity of any member of the gang.

Piled high in one corner was a large quantity of the rich quartz, great blocks of which were almost solid gold.

The stuff had evidently been placed there to await a good opportunity for removing it to some point where the outlaws could find a market for it.

The search of the room completed, Gentleman Joe continued down the passage-way, determined to find the exit described by Derringer Dick.

It was this secret of the mine, this unknown entrance which had probably enabled the outlaws to keep possession of the place so long and to work it so profitably.

Soon after leaving the underground room, he found that the passage-way led down a steep descent.

The quantity of gold visible in the surface of the walls was now growing rapidly less at every yard he advanced.

Gentry was proceeding along cautiously, keeping his eyes and ears open to guard against surprise.

Suddenly the oppressive silence of the underground passage was broken by a peculiar hissing sound which came from behind him.

At first he was unable to make out what it was, but quickly discovered that the sound was rapidly coming nearer.

Quickly putting out his lantern, Gentry drew a pistol and turned to face the unknown danger.

As he did so, a faint splutter of light flashed for a moment in the dark tunnel a hundred feet away, went down and disappeared for an instant, only to flash up again like the rising and falling of a spark moved by invisible hands.

The hissing, sputtering sound continued without intermission, and was rapidly drawing nearer.

The dim flash of light which seemed to send forth each time it was visible a small shower of sparks, rose and fell at regular intervals.

As quickly as possible, Gentleman Joe relighted his pocket-lantern, and sent its rays flashing back along the dark passage-way.

One glance along the wake of the light revealed the object that was coming down the tunnel toward him.

It was an immense bomb made by rolling a mass of

powder and dynamite up in a piece of cloth and binding the whole together securely until it formed one large round ball.

Attached to this was a long piece of miners' fuse, the end of which had been set on fire.

Once the fuse burned down to the bomb, there would be an explosion, which would blow every movable object within a hundred yards in either direction in the tunnel to atoms.

Gentry knew the terrible force contained in such a rudely constructed bomb, because he had often seen them used for blasting in mining operations in the West.

It was evident now that his second entrance into the mine had been observed by the outlaws, and that they had adopted this desperate method of ridding themselves forever of the man who had dared to meddle with their mine.

Gentry's situation was a trying one.

He saw that the fuse was rapidly burning down close to the bomb, and that the latter would explode within a few minutes.

At this point there was a steep decline in the passage-way and the bound mass of powder and dynamite was rolling swiftly toward him.

It was evident that his movements had been well timed by the hidden outlaws and that they had sent the messenger of death upon his trail believing that it would overtake him just as the fuse burned down to the powerful explosive.

It was a time for quick thought and action.

At first glance there seemed to be only one chance of escape.

If he could catch the bomb and extinguish the fuse, he would be safe.

But even that was a desperate and uncertain chance.

The great mass of explosive was heavy, and it had gained such momentum in its descent down the passage-way that it would be no easy matter to catch and extinguish the fuse.

However, Gentry, with a steady nerve, determined to make the attempt.

Standing with his back against the wall at one side of the passage-way, he made a quick grab at the big ball as it shot down the tunnel toward him.

He had put out his lantern again, and the only light was that made by the burning fuse.

In the darkness the Gilt-Edged Sport made a slight miscalculation of distance.

The big mass of deadly explosive shot past his feet and the quick desperate clutch he made at the fuse missed.

There was only one other chance of escape.

And quick as lightning, Gentry took that chance.

Springing forward, he gave the big rolling ball a violent kick, which greatly increased its speed down the steep incline.

Then wheeling around quickly he threw himself flat on his face at the bottom of the tunnel, and without a tremor, awaited the explosion which he felt sure would come in a few moments.

But the seconds grew into minutes, and still the bomb did not explode.

For five minutes Gentleman Joe lay flat on the bottom, and, no explosion having occurred, he knew that the bomb had missed fire.

He got up, and relighting his lantern, ran rapidly down the passage-way toward the secret exit.

A hundred yards away the tunnel made a sharp bend to the left, and there, lodged securely against the projecting ledge of rock, was the big ball of explosive which had been intended to blow him to pieces.

A hasty examination showed that his kick had served a double purpose.

His boot-heel happened to strike squarely on the burning fuse, and had extinguished it when less than an inch of it remained.

Ten minutes later, Gentleman Joe, as cool and collected as if nothing unusual had occurred, emerged from the underground tunnel, through the secret exit on the far side of the hill.

He had solved the secret of the mine.

CHAPTER IX.

DERRINGER DICK'S LAST STAND.

When Gentleman Joe found himself safely out of the mine by the secret entrance, he knew there was only one more thing to do to complete the job he had undertaken.

That was to notify the company which had employed him to come and take possession of the property.

He had no doubt that the mysterious band of outlaws who were holding possession of the mine would disappear from the locality at the first show of force.

He started back at once to the railroad station to notify his employers to come at once with sufficient force to hold possession and develop the mine.

A long, hard climb carried him back to the top of the hill underneath which was located the rich deposit of gold.

From there a few hours of rapid walking would bring him to the station.

He had proceeded some few miles on the journey, and was walking along a wooded ridge on one side of which there was a steep cliff.

The sound of rifle shots in the distance attracted his attention.

Then he remembered that it was in this direction he had sent the band of vigilantes from the Red Quartz mining camp when he turned them off the trail of Derringer Dick, the outlaw.

Suspecting that they had again struck the trail of their intended victim, Gentry hurried forward.

He had gone but a little ways when he saw smoke rising above the tree-tops ahead, and could hear the roaring and crackling of the flames.

The dry wood on top of the ridge had been set on fire.

Gentry still hurried on anxious to learn the meaning of the shots he had heard, and the sudden outbreak of flame from the woods.

He soon came to a little knoll, and ascending this, he could see for a considerable distance around the hill-side beyond.

He saw a wide circle of flame sweeping up the side of the hill at a rapid pace.

Above the roar of the flames he could hear now and then the sharp report of a rifle.

The wind was blowing strongly from the east, driving the fire through the dry woods toward the edge of the cliff at a rapid rate.

Gentry stopped where he could command a view of the scene below, and awaited developments.

In a few moments he saw the figure of a man slowly retreating before the advancing circle of fire.

With the aid of a small field-glass which he carried, he was able to make out that the fugitive was Derringer Dick.

Beyond the line of fire he could make out a scattered line of horsemen, and recognized them as the vigilantes from the Red Quartz mine camp.

They had struck the trail of the young outlaw again, and with fire and lead were driving him back to the edge of the cliff and closing in around him so that he had no chance of escape.

Gentleman Joe was nearly a mile away from the scene, and so swiftly was the line of fire creeping up the hill-side he saw it would be useless for him to again attempt to aid Derringer Dick.

The latter was retreating slowly before the advancing flames, and, whenever an opportunity offered, he would fire a shot at his pursuers.

The cliff toward which Derringer Dick was retreating rose almost a hundred feet above the narrow ravine below.

He was completely hemmed in by the fire and his pursuers.

There is no chance of escape, as a leap over the cliff would be fatal, but Gentleman Joe, who is intently watching the slender, delicate-looking young outlaw, can see through his glasses that there is not a quiver of the lip nor a sign of fear about Derringer Dick.

The young desperado seems to realize that he has played his last card and lost.

Face to face with a fearful death, his only idea, apparently, is that he must die game.

Closer and closer creep the hot flames; the smoke is rolling in dense black clouds above the head of the doomed man, and every time the wind makes a rift in the cloud, the rough miners who are bent on avenging the murder of their companions fire at the man who is being slowly driven back nearer and nearer the point where he must make his last stand.

The desperate game of life and death is soon ended.

The circle of fire in the underbrush has swept up so close that the clothing of the outlaw is burning in half a dozen places where it has caught from flying sparks.

Gentry, watching the weird scene with a strange fascination, sees that Derringer Dick is standing on the very edge of the cliff, a grim smile on his face, and a pistol in each hand.

It is evident that he is near his last round of cartridges, and is saving his shots for an opening at close range where he can be sure of bringing down one or more of the stern avengers.

A moment more and a flurry of wind comes sweeping up the hill; there is a sudden fresh burst of flame, and, for a moment, the slender figure of the outlaw at bay is lost to view.

The next moment, when the smoke lifts, Gentleman Joe sees Derringer Dick, surrounded by tongues of red flame, raise his pistols quickly, and firing two shots at the pursuers who crowd close to the circle of fire, the young man turns and leaps headlong over the cliff.

The flames rush on, sweeping everything inflammable before them, and, with a last leap and roar, their red tongues reach over the edge of the rock as if making a final grasp at their intended victim who had just escaped them.

The vigilantes, too, had seen their quarry make the mad plunge over the cliff, and they knew that they had been cheated of their prey.

The fire burned itself out quickly, leaving a blackened and smoking waste behind, and the men from Red Quartz, their work finished, turned and rode slowly away.

With a sigh of regret for the fate of the young outlaw who had shown that he had some good qualities, including the merit of desperate courage, Gentleman Joe turned away from the scene and resumed his journey to Frog Back Curve.

He soon reached that section of the foot-hills which he had come to recognize as the stamping-ground of the Rocky Rangers.

At one point the trail, crossing one of the numerous little valleys that lay between the broken hills, crossed by means of a small foot-log a narrow but deep gorge, at the bottom of which flowed a small stream from the mountains beyond.

The miners who had marked out this pathway through the woods had cut down a small tree and thrown the trunk of it across this gorge, which was less than twenty feet in width, but fully three times as much in depth.

It was a difficult and dangerous crossing, and in order to add something of safety, a rude hand-rail had been erected on one side.

When Gentry came to this point, his natural caution caused him to stop and take a careful look around before he started across.

There was no one in sight, and, grasping the hand-rail with his left hand, he stepped out on the log and started to walk across.

He was two-thirds of the way over when a little, dwarfish figure, with a grinning face that might have been that of man or animal, suddenly leaped out of the bushes, and catching the end of the foot-log in both hands, pushed it off the ledge of rock where it lay.

Gentry was caught unawares.

When he felt the log slipping away from under his feet he knew his danger, and caught a firm grip on the hand-rail.

He was less than ten feet from the bank, and with a quick, strong pull on the hand-rail, which, fortunately, held firm, he swung himself clear of the log, and, with a short swing back and forth, and a leap forward, he landed safely on the edge of the cliff, with not an inch of space to spare.

With a cry of rage, like an animal baffled of its prey,

the little hunchback drew a knife and leaped upon the man he had sought to hurl to the bottom of the gorge.

Gentry saw the knife uplifted, and, reaching out his hand, caught the fellow by the ankles, and threw him to the ground with great force.

The knife of the hunchback slipped from his hand and went tumbling down into the gorge below.

Then the fellow lay prostrate on the very edge of the cliff, completely in the power of the Gilt-Edged Sport.

The slightest push would have sent him headlong down into the gorge, and such a fall would have meant certain death.

Instead of pushing him over, Gentry caught the fellow by the arm, and with a quick movement swung him around out of danger.

"You were a trifle slow that time," he said, with a grim smile, to the fellow, who was now pale and trembling with fright.

The hunchback looked up with a hesitating glance, evidently wondering what fate was in store for him.

He had played his one card in the game, and having lost, expected no mercy.

But the dwarf could not repress a feeling of admiration for the strength and courage of the man who had so cleverly outwitted him.

"Who are you?" demanded Gentleman Joe, sternly.

"I am called Dinky Dobbins," answered the dwarf, in a whining voice.

"And you are a member of the Rocky Rangers, I suppose?"

The hunchback made no answer.

"What were you to get if you succeeded in sending me to the bottom of the gorge?"

Again Dinky Dobbins remained silent.

"Speak out, you wretch, or I'll pitch you down there!"

As Gentry spoke he caught the hunchback by the shoulders and shook him until his teeth rattled.

"The captain offered a thousand dollars to the one who would get you out of the way."

"Who is the captain?"

"Mike Molony, chief of the Rocky Rangers."

"And he wants me out of the way, does he?"

Dinky Dobbins grinned until his mouth seemed to spread all over his face.

"Well, I reckon he won't do much as long as you stay around here."

"Where is your captain to-day?"

"Gone down to the station."

"What is he doing there?"

"Looking for you, I suppose," replied the dwarf, with another hideous grin.

Feeling that he was wasting time with this fellow, Gentry started to resume his journey.

Then he remembered the woman that called herself Mournful Mary who had sought to entice him into the hands of the outlaws.

Thinking he might be able to learn more about her from this fellow, he called to the dwarf:

"Do you know a woman who is known as Mournful Mary?" he asked.

"Yes, I know her."

"Who is she?"

"She was a friend of the captain. She is smart, too, and as brave as any of them."

"You say she was a friend of the captain. Does that mean that they are not friends now?"

"She has gone away."

"Where has she gone?"

"Don't know."

"Did they quarrel before they parted?"

"Worse than that. The captain tried to strangle her to death."

"Then they have parted for good?"

"No; you do not know that woman," answered the dwarf, as a peculiar expression came over his face. "She will follow him to the ends of the earth."

"Then I take it they are enemies."

"She is a woman who never forgets or forgives."

Gentleman Joe could waste no more time, and hurried away.

"I must find Mournful Mary," he said to himself. "The woman will be useful to me now."

Before another day the Gilt-Edged Sport had not only found Mournful Mary, but several other persons who were trying to play a part in the game in which he now held the winning hand.

CHAPTER X.

A DEAD GAME SPORT.

The Red Star gambling-house in Frog Back Curve was running in full blast.

The place was crowded with miners, prospectors, and professional gamblers, and every game and table in the house was well patronized.

It was still early in the evening when Gentleman Joe, who had sent off some dispatches and ended his work for the day, strolled into the place.

He had come merely as a spectator, but finding nothing of special interest in the crowd, he was soon engaged in a game of faro.

He played for a little while with indifferent success, and then cashing in his chips, took another stroll around the room to study the faces of the men gathered there.

When he passed the faro-table again he observed a well-dressed young man sitting in the game with a number of high stacks of chips in front of him, and an interested crowd gathered around watching his play.

"Billy has a great run of luck to-night," Gentry heard one man say to another.

The remark, it was evident, was applied to the stylishly dressed fellow, who was now the sole player at that table.

Gentry joined the crowd of curious ones and watched the play with interest.

"That's Billy Gramer, the sport, better known as Four Aces," he heard a man at his right remark to a companion.

"Well, he's a dead game sport," replied the other, who was watching with breathless interest the piles of chips and gold dust which the young man at the table was staking on a turn of the cards.

"You bet he's a dead game sport," said the man who had spoken first, as he watched the play with an expression of admiration.

"He's hitting the bank hard, too."

"Why, it's a thousand on the turn of every card."

"And he's been winning all night."

"Has not lost a bet, I heard one of the boys say."

"He'll soon break the bank if he keeps on at that rate."

The man at the table paid no attention to the remarks of the spectators around him, but continued to place his bets with a steady hand.

There was a smile on his lips, and he played like a man who has a feeling that he cannot lose.

Billy Gramer, the gambler, who was known to his associates as Four Aces, was a slender young man of twenty five.

He had keen gray eyes, a light mustache, and hands as small and delicate as those of a woman.

He dressed always in the latest fashion, and was well-known at many a gambling-house in the West.

His luck at cards was phenomenal, and more than one faro dealer had barred him out of the game.

Apart from his character as a gambler, the young man was more or less a mystery.

Where he came from no one knew, and if he had any other business than card-playing, he never spoke of it to such acquaintances as he picked up around the gaming-table.

For some time he had made his headquarters at Frog Back Curve, playing occasionally in the different gambling-houses, but usually risking only small sums.

He would disappear from the town for days at a time, only to return as unexpectedly as he had gone away.

When he came back from these trips, it was noticed by those who were on speaking terms with him that he was always flush with money, and seemed entirely indifferent as to whether he won or lost at the card-table.

But he never volunteered any information as to where he had been, and there was no one in the place who felt well enough acquainted with him to ask any questions.

While Gentleman Joe was watching the successful gambler, the latter remarked to the dealer that the game was getting a little slow since every one else had dropped out.

The face of the dealer was white with excitement, and his hands trembled as he drew the cards from the box.

The bank was a heavy loser, and it seemed as if luck would never turn.

"I think I will double up for a little while just to liven up the game," remarked Gramer, with a quiet smile.

The dealer gasped, but made no reply.

"A thousand on the queen."

"Queen wins!" cried the crowd of spectators, in chorus, as they pressed closer about the table.

"Two thousand on the nine!"

"Nine wins!"

This was shouted by a score of men in the crowd, who were almost as much excited as the dealer, who now seemed dazed by the wonderful run of luck of the young man known as Four Aces.

"Four thousand on the seven."

The soft white hand of the gambler pushed the pile of chips, coin, and gold dust across the table, until it rested on the card he had named.

Drops of cold perspiration stood on the brow of the dealer as he started with shaking hands to slide the cards out of the box.

"Seven wins!"

The spectators were growing wild with excitement.

They pressed so closely about the lone player at the table that he had no room to move his elbows.

Short men climbed on chairs, stools, and tables, in order that they might look over the shoulders of their taller companions and keep track of the play.

As Gramer raked in his winning on the last turn of the cards, he drew a cigarette from his pocket, lighted it, and puffed away for a minute in silence.

Then carefully placing all the money in front of him in as small a pile as possible, he pushed it half-way across the table until the centre of it was over a card.

"Eight thousand on the king!"

The spectators held their breath in suppressed excitement as the pale and nervous dealer once more began to slip the cards out of the box.

"King wins!"

The cry was a wild, hoarse shout in which a hundred strong-lunged miners joined.

They were carried away with the nerve of the player, and the success of his daring play.

Nothing like it had ever been seen before in the town.

Gramer raked in his enormous winnings, and coolly lighted another cigarette.

For a moment he seemed to hesitate, and then, looking across the table at the dealer with a pleasant smile, he asked:

"Any limit to-night?"

"The only limit is the capital of the bank," replied the dealer, gruffly.

"Then let me know what that is," replied Gramer, as he began to arrange his money for placing another bet.

"Make your bets! Such luck won't last always," snapped the dealer, who was getting angry because the cards were running against him.

For several moments Gramer looked at the cards spread out on the table in front of him as if he were carefully calculating some desperate chance.

"I think I'll try a low one this time," he said at last.

"High or low, it's all the same to the house. Place your bets," said the dealer.

"Sixteen thousand on the deuce!"

For a moment the silence in the room was absolutely oppressive.

The spectators again held their breath, as the pale and trembling dealer started to turn the cards out of the box.

Apparently the coolest man in the crowd was the one who had just staked a small fortune on the turn of a card.

"Deuce wins!"

The cry that broke from the throats of the strong-lunged miners seemed as if it would lift the roof off the house.

None of them had any particular sympathy or interest in the player who had made such enormous winnings, but they were all by common impulse against the house.

To them a gambling-house was a sort of common enemy, because many of them had lost in a night the gold it had taken them weeks and months of hard labor to dig out of the hills.

They were glad to see any one beat the bank, and such enormous winnings aroused their enthusiasm to a high pitch.

The dealer snatched up the card-box and hurled it to the floor with an oath.

Never before in all his experience had he had such a run of hard luck.

"The bank is broken!" he said, in a tone of disgust, as he began to pile out the coin, bills, and gold dust to pay the last big winning of the successful gambler.

"Do you want a stake?" asked Gramer, pleasantly.

"What do you mean?"

"I have more money here than I can carry. I will take your due bill for twenty thousand."

For a moment the dealer looked at him in amazement.

"I mean it," said the winner, and, taking pencil and paper from his pocket, he wrote out a due bill for twenty thousand dollars.

Pushing the paper and that amount of money across the table, he asked the dealer to sign the due bill.

Mechanically the latter obeyed, and then, raking in the money, he gathered up his cards and deal box, placed them in position, and then, facing the crowd with a satisfied smile, called out:

"Come, gentlemen, make your bets! The bank is open for business!"

Gramer lighted a fresh cigarette, and, gathering up the balance of the money that he had won, he got up from the table.

As he turned toward the bar he came face to face with Gentleman Joe.

For a moment the two men looked straight into each other's eyes.

Gentry saw in that brief glance an expression of satisfaction stealing over the face of the gambler.

The latter smiled and bowed pleasantly, and then invited the man from Denver to join him in a drink at the bar.

Suspecting that there was some special object concealed in the invitation, Gentry promptly accepted.

The two men had a drink together, and for a few moments discussed the game which had just been finished.

"You had a great run of luck to-night," said Gentleman Joe to his companion.

"They come once in a great while, but I shall lose it all probably the next time I play. The luck of a gambler is uncertain."

"But you play with the skill of an expert, and you evidently have the nerve to lose as well as to win."

"Oh, I have the nerve for any fate," said the gambler, with a laugh.

Gentry ordered another round of drinks, because he was just in the humor to see the adventure through to the end.

He was determined to lead the gambler on until he forced him to show his hand.

Gentleman Joe realized that since his identity had become known in that locality, and probably his business there also, he might expect to meet enemies in the most unexpected places.

After the second drink, Gramer invited his new acquaintance to join him in a game of poker, for small stakes, at one of the tables in the room.

Gentry agreed. They obtained a deck of cards, and sat down to play.

The gambler who had just had such a run of luck at faro seemed to take very little interest in the poker game which he had suggested, and began to lose money from the start.

He was studying the face of his opponent closer than he studied the run of the cards.

This did not escape the notice of Gentleman Joe.

"You are a stranger here, I take it," asked Gramer.

"I have not been here long."

"Prospecting?"

"Yes, in a small way."

"What success?"

"Very little, so far."

"I suppose you have come for the same purpose as all other prospectors who come to this locality?"

"What is that?"

"To find the Hamp Hull Mine."

As Gramer spoke he shot a quick, searching glance across the table at his companion.

The latter was apparently busy shuffling the cards, and seemed to take no particular notice of the question.

"What is the Hamp Hull Mine?" asked Gentry, as he dealt another hand of cards.

"It is supposed to be a very rich mining claim."

"Who owns it?"

"That is a question a good many people are trying to find out," replied the gambler, with a laugh.

"And they are unable to settle it?"

"Well, the matter is still in dispute."

"Is the mine very rich?"

"It is said to contain millions. You seem very much interested in it."

"Naturally; any one would be interested in a rich mine which may be in need of an owner."

"That is well put, but I reckon this property won't lie idle long for lack of owners."

"Do you know where it is located?"

"Somewhere in the hills. I do not know the exact spot. I hear that there is a new prospector on the ground in search of the property, and that he has announced his intention of finding it and taking possession."

"Who is the new prospector?"

"To some people, I believe, he is known by the name of Gentleman Joe."

Billy Gramer, the gambler, spoke these words in a slow, drawling tone, while pretending to scan the faces of the cards which he held in his hands, but his keen, gray eyes were really searching the countenance of the man on the other side of the table.

If he expected Gentry to betray himself by word or action, he was disappointed.

The latter gave no sign that he understood the purpose of the gambler, which was evidently an attempt to make sure of his identity.

For a few moments they continued their game of poker in silence, but both had long since lost interest in it.

Then the gambler changed the subject, and for ten minutes talked away at a lively rate about other matters.

Gentry was puzzled by his actions, and was beginning to grow tired of the by-play which so far promised no startling developments.

"Excuse me, Mr. Gentry, I believe it is my deal."

Gentleman Joe passed over the cards to the man at the other side of the table, and then like a flash it dawned upon him that for once in his life he had been taken off his guard.

His ready response amounted to an admission that the gambler had called his name correctly.

The Gilt-Edged Sport felt like kicking himself as he saw a quiet smile playing about the lips of the man across the table.

But after a moment's reflection, he concluded that it was just as well that he had been taken off his guard.

The gambler was now sure of his identity, and would therefore show his hand all the quicker.

When Gramer had finished dealing the next hand, he glanced at his own cards and threw them down with an oath.

Luck had been running against him ever since he sat down to play.

After throwing down his cards, the gambler gave a quick glance back over his shoulder into the crowd, then raising his right hand, lifted his hat from his head for a moment, and then put it back again.

"What is the meaning of that signal?"

Gentry spoke in a low tone, but under his searching gaze, the face of the gambler flushed.

"What do you mean? I do not understand."

"You gave a signal just now. What was the meaning of it?"

"How do you know I gave a signal?"

"When you lifted your hat, the movement was understood by some one in the room."

"How do you know that?"

"Never mind how I know it. It was true."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"That you will find out soon enough; but I warn you not to attempt any double play. I have you covered."

As Gentry spoke he pushed the muzzle of a pistol through an opening in the lining of his coat far enough for the gambler to see it.

It was a small weapon which he carried in his side pocket for use in just such emergencies.

Sitting there at the table, apparently engaged in a quiet game of cards, he had the drop on the man across the table, and if need be, could shoot him dead before the latter could make a move.

No other man in the room could tell that anything unusual had occurred so far as appearances went.

"I lay down my hand. You hold the winning cards," said Gramer, when he realized that Gentry really had the drop.

"What is your game, anyway?" asked Gentry, in a low tone.

"That is for you to find out. I have discovered yours."

"What is mine?"

"The gold of Hamp Hull!"

As the gambler spoke he suddenly got up and, walking swiftly away from the table, mingled in the crowd around the bar.

Gentry followed, and attempted to keep him in sight.

But Gramer dodged in and out among the miners who filled the place with the quickness of a weasel.

In five minutes he had disappeared.

Gentry looked the crowd over carefully, and making sure that the gambler was no longer in the place, he started back to his hotel.

As he stepped out of the door into the darkness a woman in black touched him on the arm and in a low tone said:

"I must have a word with you."

Gentry followed the woman, who led the way to a point out of sight and hearing of the gambling-house.

Gentry had easily recognized the tall, slender form, and the low, trembling voice.

The woman was Mournful Mary.

When they reached a point where they were safe from observation the woman turned suddenly and said in a low tone:

"You are in danger."

"Well, there's nothing unusual in that," he replied, curtly.

"But you had better be careful. They are on your trail."

"You mean the Rocky Rangers?"

"No, no; there is no danger from those cowards," the woman hissed through her clinched teeth, with a sudden outburst of anger.

The Shadows of the Hills are on your trail. Take warning in time while you still have a chance of escape."

"It is very kind of you to warn me. Have you become my friend since first we met?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"You are Mournful Mary, the woman who tried to lead me into the camp of the outlaws. What is your object in coming here to warn me to-night?"

"I did not come for that. I saw your danger, and took the liberty of warning you while there was time for you to get away. I thought that might in some measure atone for what I was forced to do the other night."

"Then you are no longer working with Mike Molony and the Rocky Rangers?"

"No, no. I have escaped from them at last."

"What are you doing here?"

"Waiting a chance for vengeance!" hissed the woman, as her black eyes gleamed with passion like two coals of fire.

Gentry held out his hand to the woman.

"I thank you for the warning," he said, "and very soon I may be able to repay the service."

"You owe me no thanks. I am glad of the chance to do you a service. You are a brave and honest man."

"Do you expect Mike Molony here to-night?"

"He is somewhere in town."

"And you expect to find him?"

"I will follow him to the end of the earth!" cried the woman, vehemently.

"Well, I want to find him first. I, too, have an account to settle with him."

Mournful Mary started to make some reply, but she did not finish it.

A black, weird-looking shadow rose suddenly out of the darkness, and moved silently toward the couple.

The woman saw it first, and, with a cry of terror, she turned and fled.

Gentleman Joe wheeled around, and, seeing the strange-looking object approaching, concluded that the woman was right, that the Shadows of the Hills were indeed upon his trail.

The strange-looking object was approaching swiftly, but it did not find the man of nerve unprepared.

Dropping down on one knee, Gentry waited until the black object was within easy reach.

Then, with a bound, he sprang up, and throwing out his arms, caught the shadow in a vise-like grip.

A muttered oath from beneath the heavy black mask proved that he had found a substance instead of a shadow.

The Gilt-Edged Sport held in his grasp a big, powerful man.

There was a short, sharp, and desperate struggle in which the black mask and disguise were torn away.

In freeing himself from these, Gentry's assailant managed to wrench himself loose, and dashed away in the darkness as fast as he could go.

The Gilt-Edged Sport did not attempt pursuit.

CHAPTER XI.

A DESPERATE BATTLE.

The fighting blood of Gentleman Joe was aroused when he realized that danger was gathering thick around him.

It was evident now that instead of one band of ordinary outlaws bent on plunder, he had to deal with another and far more desperate gang in his attempt to take possession of the Hamp Hull gold mine.

The Shadows of the Hills were on his trail in earnest, and they probably had an idea by this time of what he was doing in the locality.

After his encounter with the mysterious individual in the black mask and disguise, Gentry started back to the Red Star gambling-house.

He was anxious for a further interview with Billy Gramer, the lucky gambler.

A round of the gaming-tables and a scrutiny of the faces of the men gathered in front of the bar convinced him that the man he was looking for was not there.

Then he turned and left the place, intending to go back to his hotel and get a good night's rest in order to be ready for the work which he had mapped out for himself for the following day.

When he left the gambling-house a big man in the garb of a miner followed him.

The latter kept in the shadow as much as possible, but Gentleman Joe was on the alert for just such moves.

He had not gone fifty yards from the place before he was aware that he was followed.

Walking along very slowly, he appeared to be looking intently at the ground in front of him, but all the time he was on the alert for any move on the part of the big fellow who was on his trail.

He had not long to wait for the latter to show his hand.

As soon as Gentry passed out of range of the light from the open door of the gambling-house the man began to close upon him.

It was evident that the shadow was going to attack him from behind, and was only waiting for his intended victim to reach a dark and secluded spot where they would be safe from interruption to make the venture.

As he walked along slowly Gentry could hear the stealthy footsteps behind him slowly drawing nearer.

He was walking down the main street of the little town, but it was now late at night, and the only persons stirring were those around the gambling-houses and saloons.

A fight to the death might occur in the middle of the

street without any one except those actually engaged knowing anything about it.

Gentry was a good judge of distance by sound, and without turning his head he could tell how close the man on his trail had come.

The shadow following him was closing up the gap between them when Gentleman Joe came to a large tree standing close by the side of the street.

He quickly stepped behind this and waited for the other man to come up.

This movement was made so silently it was not observed by his pursuer.

The latter, finding that the sound of footsteps ahead of him had suddenly ceased, quickened his pace.

Then Gentry became aware for the first time that some one was following the man who was on his trail.

A dark, shadowy form was creeping stealthily along behind the man who had followed him from the gambling-house.

While Gentleman Joe crouched behind the tree where he was safe from observation the man who was following him went by and was hurrying on in the darkness.

Then, like a flash, a black shadow shot past.

In the darkness Gentry saw something that looked like the flash of a knife.

This was followed by a fierce oath from the man in front.

"Take that!"

It was the voice of a woman that rang out sharp and clear in the darkness.

Again Gentleman Joe saw the bright gleam of steel.

The woman in black was striking at the man with a knife.

With a cry that was like the roar of a wild animal at bay, the latter turned to face his assailant.

A moment later and the Gilt-Edged Sport was the only witness of a fierce and desperate struggle in the darkness, which looked as if it was to be a fight to the death.

But the woman in black had struck too soon.

Her blow with the knife fell short, and in a moment she was in the grasp of the man whom she had attempted to strike down.

The two went down together, but a moment later a cry from the woman warned Gentry that she was getting the worst of the fight.

Then he decided to interfere, for he had already concluded that the woman in black was Mournful Mary.

Once that night she had tried to do him a good turn.

Gentry ran forward, and, dark as it was, he was able to see that the man who had been following him had the woman by the throat and was slowly strangling her to death.

She had dropped her knife in the struggle, and was now entirely defenseless.

The fight was ended in a moment.

Gentleman Joe seized the man by the arms, and lifting him to his feet, gave him a shove that sent him spinning ten feet down the street, where he fell in a heap.

The woman struggled to her feet and looked around in a dazed sort of way.

"You are in hard luck to-night, Mary," said Gentry.

"Where is he? Give me one more chance!" cried the woman, who was wild with rage and excitement.

"You had better wait until you get a better opportunity."

"I will kill him!"

"Perhaps, but not to-night. You had better wait until you can strike a sure and certain blow."

Then the woman seemed to vaguely realize what had happened, and she also recognized the voice of her rescuer.

"I am glad to see that you escaped," she said.

"You mean from the shadow that frightened you?"

"Yes."

"That was easy enough, but I am glad that I got around here in time to be of service to you."

"Beware of those shadows. They are a desperate lot."

"I am accustomed to dealing with desperate men. But tell me why did you make this attack on the man who was about to strangle you because you were not quick enough with your knife?"

"He was here to meet another woman to-night. I will kill him!"

This threat Mournful Mary fairly hissed through her

clincbed teeth as she looked around in the darkness for the man who was the object of her hatred, Mike Molony, the leader of the Rocky Rangers.

"Well, he was after me to-night."

"You have nothing to fear from him. He would not dare to meet you face to face."

"Tell me what you know of the men who are called the Shadows of the Hills, and I will see to it that Mike Molony does not trouble you again."

"I know very little of them. No one knows much of them, that is why they are dangerous. You can never tell when or where they will strike."

"Do you know any of them?"

"Not one. There is a mystery about them. They appear in their strange disguise, and then they vanish, and are not seen again for weeks, perhaps."

"Do you know their number?"

"No one knows that. But I will tell you what I suspect."

The voice of the woman sank to a whisper, and she glanced around in the darkness in a nervous way as if she expected the shadows to suddenly arise and confront her.

"That men who are apparently living very honest and respectable lives in this town are members of the gang."

"Why do you suspect that?"

"Because they seem to know everything that is going on."

"That is not proof of their identity."

"True, but if they were really a band of outlaws hiding in the hills they would not know so much."

Gentry was compelled to admit that there was force in this reasoning, in fact, it was what he had already begun to suspect.

Finding that he could obtain no information of importance from the woman, he was about to separate from her after another warning that she had better not take any more such chances with the chief of the Rocky Rangers.

"My knife, where is it?" asked the woman.

Gentry felt around on the ground where the struggle had taken place, and soon found the weapon.

"It is the only friend left me," said Mournful Mary, in a sad tone, as she thrust the blade under a leather belt which she wore about her waist.

"If it fails to avenge my wrongs, I can at least use it to end my own miserable career."

While the woman and Gentry had been talking Mike Molony had slipped away in the darkness.

"Look out! There they are again!" cried the woman, suddenly, as she was turning away.

Gentry wheeled around to find himself face to face with half a score of the men of the black masks.

They had appeared on the scene so suddenly they seemed to have sprung out of the ground.

They formed a circle about the Gilt-Edged Sport and without a word they sprang upon him and in a moment he was borne to the ground under the weight of the great odds against him.

The men in black seemed to be unarmed.

If they had weapons they made no attempt to use them. It was evidently their intention to take Gentleman Joe prisoner and not to injure him in any way.

But they had not counted on the wonderful strength and agility of the man with whom they had to deal.

As he went down under the heap of masked men, Gentry drew a knife in one hand and a pistol in the other.

In a moment the ranks of the Shadows of the Hills would have been greatly reduced, but the Gilt-Edged Sport finding that they were trying to bind him and were not making any attempt to use weapons, decided to give them a surprise instead of using his weapons, which he could have done with terrible effect.

As Gentry went down a big fellow fell on top of him.

Turning over quickly, he gave this fellow a kick in the stomach that put him out of the struggle in an instant.

Then for a period of ten seconds the arms and legs of the Gilt-Edged Sport were flying like the piston rods of an engine.

At every blow or kick, a man in a black mask went down with a grunt or a groan, and took no further part in the fight.

In less time than it takes to tell it, Gentleman Joe was on top of the heap, and a badly battered lot of men were

lying scattered around on the ground with all the fight knocked out of them.

While some of them were struggling to their feet and limping away leaving a trail of profanity behind them, the Gilt-Edged Sport lighted his pocket-lantern.

He wanted to get a glimpse of the faces of some of the men who wore the black masks.

Just as his light flashed up the sharp report of a pistol rang out and the lantern was knocked from his hand by a bullet.

The masked men had suspected his intention, and one of them with a well-aimed shot had made it impossible for him to carry it out.

But the shot aroused the fighting blood of Gentleman Joe once more.

Leaving his lantern on the ground he drew a knife and sprang at the crowd.

But they saw the movement and took to their heels, leaving their opponent alone on the field.

Mournful Mary had run away at the first appearance of the masked men.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ROUT OF THE RANGERS.

The following morning Gentleman Joe slipped out of town at an early hour, and hurried away to the ravine in which the rich gold mine was located.

Knowing that a number, if not all of the mysterious individuals known as the Shadows of the Hills, were lurking about the town back of Frog Back Curve, he had decided to make another search for the hiding-place of this gang while there was a probability that he would be free from interruption.

He had already decided upon a plan which would end the work he had undertaken to do, provided he could carry it through successfully.

The success of this plan depended on his finding the headquarters of the mysterious band of men who were in possession of the Hamp Hull Mine.

Gentry spent the day tramping up and down the ravine, and over the wooded hills without substantial results.

Again and again he had found foot-prints and trails across the hills which he had followed in the hope that they would lead to some secret cave.

Each time he had been disappointed, and, finally, he gave up the search.

All he had accomplished was the finding of a new entrance to the ravine in which the mine was located.

It was late in the afternoon when he approached the opening in the hill-side which led to the rich deposit of gold.

As he came in sight of the place he was surprised to see four men climbing slowly down the long rope-ladder that led from the top of the cliff above.

It was evident from their movements that they were unfamiliar with this method of getting up and down a cliff.

Gentry cautiously approached a little closer, and by the time the men were half-way down the ladder he had recognized the one in the lead.

Major Hays and his men had made one discovery—that they had not located the mine for which they had been searching.

It was the major and his mining experts who were slowly and laboriously climbing down from the top of the cliff.

It was amusing to watch them, and Gentry stopped to see the fun.

The four men were fifty feet or more above the bottom of the ravine, when Gentleman Joe, glancing up to the top of the cliff, saw a man bending over and watching them climbing down the ladder.

Suddenly the fellow on the top of the cliff drew a knife from his belt and reached over to cut the rope.

Gentry was a hundred yards away, but fortunately for the men suspended in mid-air, he had brought a rifle with him that day.

Quick as a flash, he raised the weapon, and taking quick aim, fired at the man on the cliff.

A sharp cry followed the report of the rifle, and the long knife dropped from the broken hand of the man at the end of the ladder, and came tumbling down the side of the cliff, narrowly missing the four startled men who had been saved by the lightning shot of Gentleman Joe.

Major Hays and his companions heard the shot, and saw the flash of the knife as it shot past them and dropped to the ravine below with a dull thud.

For a moment they stopped, and looked up at the cliff above them, and down to the ground below, but failed to see either the man who had attempted to hurl them into eternity, or the one who had fired the shot just in time to save their lives.

All four of the men knew that they were in danger, and they lost no time in clambering down to the ground below.

As they stepped from the ladder Gentleman Joe came forward with a smile on his face and greeted the major.

"What the devil are you doing here?" cried the old warrior, who was startled by the sudden appearance of the man who had several times before warned or saved him from danger.

"Practicing a fancy shot with my rifle," replied Gentry, with a smile.

"Then it was you who fired the shot we heard just now? Were you firing at us?"

As the major asked this question, he threw back his shoulders with a martial air and made a bluff as if he were going to draw a pistol.

For answer, Gentleman Joe picked up the knife that was sticking in the ground close by the foot of the cliff.

For a moment Major Hays looked from the knife to the man who held it, and then with a glance along the ladder to the top of the cliff, he seemed to understand the situation.

"You are a whole handful of trumps!" he exclaimed, with a show of enthusiasm, as he stepped forward and extended his hand to Gentleman Joe.

The latter accepted the offering of friendship with a quiet smile of satisfaction.

"I am glad I was in time to do you a good turn," he said.

"What the ~~duse~~ does it all mean, anyway?" asked the major, as he again surveyed the rope-ladder which he had just descended.

"Oh, that is used to get up and down the cliff."

"Who put it there?"

"I do not know; it may have been the miners, or possibly some of the outlaws who infest this region."

"It was the outlaws, I will wager. They seem to be everywhere around here. This is the toughest country I ever got into."

"You have encountered more of them?"

"I run across them at every turn. We have done nothing but shoot and run, run and shoot, ever since we have been here. Look at this, sir."

As the major spoke he took off his broad-brimmed hat, and held it up for inspection, and threw back the sides of his overcoat.

There were bullet holes in both.

"Why, sir, I went through twenty battles in the late war before I had as many bullet marks as that."

"You seem to have had a lively time," said Gentry, who was thoroughly enjoying the excitement of the major.

"Lively? Why, sir, we have had a — of a time."

"Have you found the mine for which you were searching?"

"No, we have been too busy dodging bullets."

"Do you expect to find it?"

"Young man, if we find our way back to the railroad station, and get safely out of this devilish country, I shall consider that we are in big luck."

"Then you have given up the search for the mine?"

"We have—the richest mine in the world would not induce me to spend another three days and nights in this wild country where you are shot at wherever you go, and kept too busy dodging bullets to even look for traces of gold."

Gentry was very well satisfied with the decision of the major, but he made no comment.

He told the party how to find the shortest way to the railroad station, and then walked with them a short dis-

tance down the ravine to make sure that they got safely past the entrance to the mine.

At parting, Major Hays shook hands with Gentleman Joe very warmly, and thanked him profusely for the favors he had done, at the same time apologizing for his curtness when first warned of his danger.

With a smile of satisfaction, Gentry stood and watched the little party until they disappeared from sight down the ravine.

Their going removed one of the complications from the work he had in hand.

It was now late in the afternoon, and as he did not care to spend a night in the woods, Gentleman Joe shortly started to return to Frog Back Curve for the night.

He found that he could save a little time and walking by taking the short cut across the ravine to the east from the mine and climbing the steep hill on the other side.

On the other side of the ravine, he found a narrow foot-trail which led up the side of the hill.

On both sides of this trail, there was a dense growth of underbrush, with rocks and bowlders here and there, making many sharp turns necessary.

He was half-way up the hill when the sharp snapping of a twig in front of him caused him to look up with a start.

Ten feet ahead the trail made a sharp turn to the right around a bowlder some ten feet high.

Gentry stopped short when he heard the breaking of the twig, and a moment later a man walking with a quick, nervous step turned the corner around the bowlder.

The eyes of the two men met, and recognition was mutual.

The man coming down the trail in such haste was Billy Gramer, the gambler.

"What the dickens are you doing here?" he exclaimed, in a tone of surprise, as he thrust his hands into the side pocket of his coat, where two bulging points revealed the presence of pistols.

"Go easy, there, my young friend. You are not as quick with your guns as you are with cards," said Gentry, in a quiet tone.

"I'm quick enough to get the drop on you. Put up your hands and explain what you are doing here."

"Allow me to suggest that you do not make a test of your assertion that you have the drop. If you do, you will find that your luck has deserted you."

"You cannot bluff me with your talk."

"I never bluff. I heard you coming, and I had you covered the moment you came in sight."

Then, for the first time, apparently, Gramer noticed that the man in front of him held a rifle across his left arm.

The muzzle was pointing straight at the breast of the gambler, and Gentry had his finger on the trigger.

"You hold the trumps again, old man. I'll get out of the game," said the gambler, as he slowly took his hands from his pockets.

"Then maybe you'll explain what you are doing here?"

"I have business with some miners up the ravine."

"You mean the ones who work in the Hamp Hull Mine?"

Gramer gave a sudden start, and shot a quick, searching glance at the man who had asked the question.

"What do you know about the Hamp Hull Mine?"

"Everything. I have just taken possession of it," replied Gentry, quietly.

For a moment the young gambler stood and gazed at the man from Denver with a half-frightened, half-puzzled expression on his face.

"Then you are the man they sent out from Denver to investigate?"

"I am, and if I am not mistaken, you are the man who sold the claim."

"How did you find that out?"

"Never mind how I found that out. I reckon we understand each other a little better now."

"You seem to understand the situation pretty well, anyhow."

"If you have any doubt about my having located and taken possession of the mine, come with me, and I will prove it to you."

"I'll take your word for it. You're a wonder, and no mistake."

"Then we might as well go back to town together if you have no objection to my company."

"Excuse me, Mr. Gentleman Joe. I know when the cards are running against me. I have had enough of this game, and I'm going to get out of it just as fast as possible."

"I think you will see it through to the end. We may need your testimony to establish the claim of the company."

"Well, whistle for me whenever you want me."

As Gramer spoke he bounded into the bushes at the side of the trail, and was off like a deer.

Dodging from tree to tree, he ran down the side of the hill toward the ravine at a tremendous rate of speed.

Gentleman Joe did not attempt to follow him, for he believed that the gambler would keep his word and get out of the game for good, now that he realized that the cards were indeed running against him.

Gentry remembered the due bill for twenty thousand dollars which Gramer held against the owner of the Red Star gambling-house, and he knew that he could find the young sport later if it developed that his testimony was absolutely necessary.

When the gambler was out of sight, Gentleman Joe resumed his journey, and crossing over the hill, again entered the stamping-ground of the Rocky Rangers.

It was getting dark by this time, and down in a little rift between two hills he saw the red glow of a camp-fire.

Suspecting at once that the men in the camp were the followers of Mike Molony, he decided to try giving them a little fright to see if they would not follow the example of Major Hays and get out of the way without more ado.

Approaching the camp-fire cautiously, Gentry found that he was correct in his conclusion.

The Rocky Rangers had camped for the night in a small open space at the foot of the hill where a spring of fresh water gushed out from under the rocks.

Creeping up within a short distance of the camp, Gentry was able to distinguish the tall, slender form of Con Conway, the ebony face of Black Joe, the fiddler, and the hunchback, Dinky Dobbins.

The big leader of the gang was nowhere in sight.

Gentry was turning over in his mind a plan for giving the Rocky Rangers a fright that they would not forget in a hurry.

But the Shadows of the Hills saved him the trouble.

While he lay hidden in the underbrush watching the movements of the outlaws, who were preparing their supper, he heard a series of wild, blood-curdling cries coming from the wooded hill beyond the camp.

The outlaws started up and grasped their weapons at the strange sound.

A moment later a score of tall, dark forms seemed to spring suddenly from the dark woods. They came down on the camp with a rush like a whirlwind.

As the black spectre-like forms rushed down on the camp, there came a rattle and roar of rifle shots followed by wild cries of pain and terror from the frightened Rocky Rangers.

The latter were taken unawares, and seemed to lose all thought of resistance at sight of the dark forms rushing down upon them so swiftly.

Throwing down their rifles, they turned to fly.

Black Joe, the fiddler, was in the lead, and at every jump he made he uttered a shriek of terror that echoed and re-echoed far over the surrounding hills.

By the light of the camp-fire, Gentry saw half a dozen of the Rocky Rangers throw up their arms, and, with cries of pain, fall headlong to the ground.

This time the Shadows of the Hills were shooting to kill.

Whatever the cause of the strife between the two gangs might be, it was evident that the men with the black masks meant to make this the battle of extermination.

Those of the Rocky Rangers who escaped the well-aimed shots of their adversaries fled in all directions, without any attempt at resistance.

The fight was over in a few minutes, and it ended in the complete rout of the Rocky Rangers.

Fully half their number lay on the ground around the camp-fire killed or wounded, while the others were flying away in the darkness in a wild rush to escape.

The men in the black masks did not attempt to pursue

those of the Rocky Rangers who had succeeded in getting away.

They rushed up to the camp-fire, and, scattering the burning wood and brush, put out the flames in a few moments.

Darkness and silence settled over the scene of carnage, and the Shadows of the Hills vanished.

The rout of the Rocky Rangers was complete.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CLOSE CALL.

When Gentleman Joe heard the masked men slipping away through the forest after the end of the bloody fight with the Rocky Rangers, he decided to attempt to follow them to their hiding-place, which he believed to be located not far away.

While he had found the Hamp Hull Mine and the secret entrance thereto, he believed that as long as these desperate outlaws were at large there would be more or less danger attending any effort to take and hold possession of the property.

He now had abundant evidence of the character of the men, and if he could succeed in locating them, it was his plan to capture the whole gang at once.

He had by this time arrived at a conclusion regarding the leadership of this band, which, if he could prove to be true, he knew would insure him all the aid necessary to run down and capture every one of them.

When the shadows slipped away in the darkness from the wrecked camp of the Rocky Rangers, the Gilt-Edged Sport followed close upon their heels.

While it was dark and the way rough, it was a comparatively easy matter to follow them.

They were twenty in number and, naturally, made considerable noise as they hurried along through the woods.

They could not hear the cautious footsteps of the man who was on their trail.

Gentry soon discovered that the outlaws were following a trail which led back to the ravine in which the mine was located.

It was an hour's walk to reach this rift in the hills, and by that time the moon was up above the mountain-tops and shining brightly.

By the light that struggled through the tree-tops he could catch an occasional glimpse of the men he was following.

They hurried along apparently not suspecting pursuit.

When they reached the ravine, they started right up the trail, in the direction of the mine.

When within a few hundred yards of the opening in the cliff which led to the rich deposits of gold, the outlaws came to a halt.

They were in an open space which was partly lighted by a few straggling rays of moonlight and keeping in the shadow of the cliff on his right Gentry was able to creep up within thirty yards of where they were standing.

He saw the outlaws remove their masks and strange-looking disguises, which they rolled up in bundles and strapped on their shoulders.

Their next move took him completely by surprise.

A tree with spreading branches stood close by the foot of the cliff at the point where the outlaws had stopped to unmask.

One of the lower branches of this tree hung down within a few feet of the ground.

The men who had just removed their masks caught hold of this low hanging branch one at a time, and swung themselves up into the tree.

Climbing up hand over hand some twenty feet along the trunk, they reached a point where one of the larger branches reached out over a shelving ledge of the cliff which was rough and broken in many places.

As soon as all of the men had in this way climbed up the side of the cliff, they started off single file along the narrow ledge of rock, and in a few moments were out of sight.

Without much delay, Gentry ran forward, and, swing-

ing himself into the tree, followed close in the footsteps of the outlaws.

When he reached the shelf-like ledge on the side of the cliff he found there a well-beaten trail, showing that it had been used by the gang for many months.

The narrow path wound sharply around the great wall of solid rock which towered a hundred feet above, and in some places it was so narrow that the walking was difficult and dangerous.

A single misstep and the man making it would plunge headlong down into the ravine fifty feet below.

The outlaws were still out of sight, but Gentry knew from the character of the path that they could not have turned aside.

He hurried forward as fast as possible, expecting to overtake them or at least come in sight of them again in a very few minutes.

The narrow trail wound along the edge of the cliff, gradually ascending and growing wider until it reached the point half-way to the top of the hill.

There the cliff, which up to this point, rose almost perpendicularly, became broken and uneven.

Gentry now crept forward with great care.

The ledge followed by the trail at this point spread out to a width of a hundred feet.

Boulders that had broken off and dropped down from the cliff above and a few tangled vines and small underbrush made the trail rough and uneven, and difficult to follow in the darkness.

Picking his way along for a hundred yards, Gentry heard the sound of voices only a short distance ahead.

The talking seemed to come out of the side of the hill or from the cliff above.

At first it was difficult to locate the direction of the sound.

Lying flat down on the ground, Gentleman Joe stopped for a few minutes to await developments.

The sound of the talking seemed to be going farther and farther away.

Then he knew that his presence had not been discovered. Again he rose and crept slowly forward, this time more carefully than ever.

The moon was on the other side of the cliff, and the trail was in the shadow.

The light was so dim he had to almost feel his way along.

As he felt his way around a huge boulder which at first glance seemed to block the entire passage-way, he caught a glimpse of a faint ray of light a short distance ahead.

The light seemed to come from an opening in the side of the hill.

He got up close enough to it to make out that there was a wide opening in the wall of rock, and a short passage-way which led to a big cave beyond.

It was from the interior of this cave that the light came.

A fire was burning somewhere within, and the blaze threw a narrow line of light out through the passage-way and across the trail.

Gentry knew that he had at last found the hiding-place of the gang of outlaws who were known as the Shadows of the Hills.

He was determined to get a look at the interior of the cave before he turned back.

He felt that he could do so without risk, as he was satisfied that they had no suspicion of his presence in the vicinity.

As he started forward toward the opening, he was able to make out in the dim light the form of a sentry pacing back and forth along the trail, with a rifle across his shoulder.

For a moment the Gilt-Edged Sport hesitated.

If the sentry discovered his presence and gave the alarm the entire gang would be upon him in a moment.

He could not well afford to risk a fight against such odds at that time.

Retreat along the narrow dark trail with the outlaws in pursuit was out of the question.

But Gentleman Joe was not a man to turn back when once he had set out to accomplish a purpose.

For a few moments he watched the sentry closely.

He saw that the fellow had a regular beat about ten yards in length up and down the trail in front of the entrance to the cave.

Except for the narrow line of light which shone out through the passage-way, the post of the sentry was in darkness.

Crawling on his hands and knees, Gentry cautiously advanced toward the entrance.

When the back of the sentry was toward him, he would creep forward a few feet, taking care to make no sound.

When the sentry turned to come back over his post, Gentry would lie flat on the ground.

In this way he managed to reach a point within a few feet of the end of the post without being seen.

Again the sentry came forward with slow and measured tread.

At the end of his post he turned with military precision and started back all unsuspecting of danger.

Like a flash, Gentry leaped to his feet, and rushed forward.

The startled sentry turned at the sound of footsteps and brought his rifle down from his shoulder.

Before he could make another move the weapon was snatched from his hands and hurled down into the ravine below.

Then the strong arms of Gentleman Joe gripped the fellow around the waist and threw him to the ground, and before he could make an outcry, a strong hand gripped his throat.

Taking a piece of strong cord from his pocket, Gentry started to bind the fellow.

But the man who had been left on guard seemed to suddenly recover his wits and made a desperate struggle for liberty.

He proved to be a man of tremendous strength and agility.

Gentry could hold him on the ground easily enough, but to hold a fellow and bind his hands and feet at the same time was not such an easy matter.

The two men rolled over and over in a desperate struggle for the mastery.

In the darkness they were rapidly getting closer and closer to the edge of the cliff.

Gentry was first to discover this, and, giving up the attempt to bind the fellow for the moment, he wrenched himself loose and sprang back a few feet from the edge of the rock.

The outlaw, finding himself free from the grasp of his assailant, struggled to his feet.

His back was toward the edge of the cliff when he started to get up.

He did not realize his danger.

As he rose from the ground one of his feet slipped on the smooth stone, he lost his balance, and, like a flash, fell backward into the ravine a hundred feet below.

The thing had happened so suddenly Gentry was taken completely by surprise.

He could not have saved the fellow if he had tried.

The outlaw went down without a cry, and his body struck the rocks below with terrible force, killing him instantly.

Fearing that the sound of the struggle might have been heard by the men inside of the cave, Gentleman Joe leaped back into the shadow of the cliff and kept perfectly still for several moments.

But no sound came from the interior to indicate that the outlaws had even a suspicion that anything was wrong.

The light in the cave was now dying out, and the sound of talking had almost ceased.

Gentry crept forward cautiously to the opening and looked inside.

Two hundred feet from the entrance in the side of the cliff there was a large room.

In the centre of this a small fire burned on the stone floor.

Grouped around this camp-fire were a score of rough-looking men.

As the fire continued to die down, the outlaws began to put away their rifles, and, rolling themselves in blankets, lay down to sleep.

Gentry watched them until all except one had turned in for the night.

The latter was a tall, powerfully built man, with slightly gray hair and a heavy black beard, which almost entirely concealed his face.

This man stirred the embers of the dying fire, and, glancing around at his companions who were all lying down, he got up and walked out toward the entrance to the cave.

Gentry saw him coming, and quickly stepped back into the shadow of the cliff.

He felt that this man was the leader of the gang.

The fellow was probably coming to make sure that the sentry was on duty and that everything was secure for the night.

Realizing that the absence of the sentinel would quickly result in discovery, Gentry resolved on a desperate plan to save himself.

Crouching in the shadow, he waited until the big outlaw stepped out into the trail clear of the entrance to the cave.

As the outlaw chief stepped out into the darkness, he looked up and down the trail, and failed to see the sentry.

Then he called him by name in a low tone.

Gentry waited no longer.

He sprang upon the big outlaw chief from behind, and threw him heavily to the ground.

The attack was so sudden and unexpected that the advantage was all with the Gilt-Edged Sport at the start.

But he quickly found that he had to handle a man who, despite advancing years, still possessed phenomenal strength.

Not a word was spoken by either man, and no weapons were drawn. It was a hand-to-hand struggle—a fight for life or death—in which strength and skill were bound to win.

Over and over in the darkness rolled the two men, each struggling desperately to catch the other by the throat.

Once when the big outlaw seemed to realize that the contest was bound to go against him in the end, he opened his mouth as if to call to his men for aid.

"Make an outcry and you are a dead man!" said Gentry, in a low tone.

This warning had the desired effect.

Again the desperate hand-to-hand struggle on the very edge of the cliff went on.

There was a sharp descent from the entrance to the cave to the edge of the precipice twenty feet away.

As the two strong men struggled they were slowly but surely working their way closer and closer to the edge of the precipice.

A faint red glow of light from the dying fire in the cave was still shining through the opening, and as it flashed up brighter for one brief instant, the two men caught a glimpse of the blackness beyond and realized that they were in danger of going down to a horrible death together.

There was no let up, however, in the terrible struggle.

Each man was bound to win the fight if he could.

It now seemed certain that one or both would be hurled over the edge of the precipice, and it was a question of strength and skill as to which could save himself when it came time for the final effort.

Gentry, who was underneath, reached out one hand quickly, and found that he could touch the sharp edge of the precipice.

Exerting all his strength, he suddenly gave a quick turn and rolled his adversary over.

The latter slipped on the smooth rock, and in a moment was hanging suspended over the edge of the cliff.

The big outlaw clutched the edge of the precipice with both hands with such force that the flesh on the ends of his fingers was broken and bruised, and the blood trickling out from the wounds made the smooth stone so slick that his hands soon began to slip.

Gentry saw the danger of his adversary, and lying flat down he reached out one hand and caught the big fellow by the arm.

It was not much he could do in the way of pulling, for fear he would be carried over the cliff himself.

But his hold on the arm of the outlaw added to the desperate energy with which the latter was holding on was enough to keep him hanging there for several minutes.

Both men were gasping for breath after their hard struggle.

Gentleman Joe was the first to speak.

"Can you pull yourself up?" he asked, in a low tone.

"No," replied the big outlaw.

"A fall from there means death."

"I know that. You have won the fight."

"There is still a chance for you."

"What is it?"

"Give up the fight for good, and I will call your men to pull you back to safety."

"Give up what fight?"

"For the mine and against law and order."

"You talk in riddles, stranger."

"I do not. You know well enough what I mean. There is no time for wasting words."

"I am not wasting any."

"Then give me your word that if I save you to-night you will turn over the mine and leave the country to-morrow."

"I will promise nothing."

"Then you know the fate that awaits you, Hamp Hull!"

"Who told you my name?"

The big outlaw hanging suspended between life and death gave a violent start when Gentry mentioned the name that had so long been a terror to the honest miners of that region.

His hold on the edge of the cliff was slipping.

He could hang on only a few moments longer.

"Speak quick! you have no time to lose!" said Gentry. "A complete surrender of everything and I will call help."

"Then you would turn me over to the miners to be tortured to death! No, I will not do it!"

"Then you have but a few moments to live. I cannot save you alone."

"You can die with me, and you shall!" cried the big outlaw chief.

With a quick movement, he raised one hand and made a grab to catch Gentry by the arm.

But the latter had anticipated just such a move, and was prepared for it.

He drew back out of the way in time.

But the movement was a fatal one for Hamp Hull.

When he raised one hand the strain on the other was too great, and in a moment his hold on the edge of the cliff was broken.

With a wild cry of rage and terror, the big outlaw chief disappeared in the darkness, and a moment later Gentry heard the crash of a heavy body on the stones at the bottom of the ravine.

But the dying cry of Hamp Hull had aroused the men in the cave.

They sprang to arms in a moment, knowing that the cry they had heard meant danger to their chief and to themselves.

Gentry scrambled back from the edge of the cliff and as the outlaws came out of the cave he ran down the narrow trail, hoping to escape in the darkness.

But they heard the sound of his footsteps, and without waiting to ascertain what had happened, they were after him like a pack of hungry wolves.

Gentleman Joe ran on until he reached a point where the trail was so narrow that only one man could pass at a time.

The outlaws who were more familiar with the way than he were gaining on him at every step.

They had already opened fire, and bullets were flying thick and fast around the head of the Gilt-Edged Sport.

At the narrow point of the trail he turned to face his pursuers.

Lying flat on the rock, he opened fire on the gang with both his pistols.

A yell of pain told that his shots were well aimed.

The unexpected resistance threw the gang into confusion, and they hurriedly fell back out of range.

Then Gentleman Joe slipped away in the darkness and made good his escape.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DANCE AT FROG BACK CURVE.

When Gentleman Joe found that the startled outlaws had gone back to their cave and given up pursuit, he slackened his pace and made his way slowly and carefully down the narrow and dangerous trail to the ravine below.

It was then late at night, and he decided to camp there until morning.

Selecting a secluded spot on the bank of a little mountain stream some distance below the mine, he built a small fire, and after warming himself, wrapped up in a blanket, and, lying down on the ground, slept soundly until morning.

When he arose the next day his first move was to pay a visit to the mine.

There he found a post driven in the ground near the entrance.

On this was tacked a notice that the claim was the property of Mike Molony.

A second notice warned all persons to keep away, as the claim had been entered in due form.

The rope-ladder which led to the top of the cliff and had been used by the Shadows of the Hills in their mysterious movements, had been cut loose at the top, and lay in a heap on the ground.

Gentry looked at the notice of alleged ownership at the entrance to the mine with an expression of quiet amusement.

"That's the fellow who got my double eagle, my lucky coin, and now he's trying to steal my mine."

"I have a double account to settle with him now, and then I think my work in this part of the country will be at an end."

Gentry promptly tore down the notice of claim ownership which had been put up by Mike Molony, and in its place he left one in the name of the company which he represented.

This done, he started back to the railroad station, for he expected the officers of the company to arrive from Denver that day.

He had gone but a few yards down the ravine when he heard the voices of a score of men in loud and excited conversation.

He advanced cautiously until he came in sight of a crowd of fifty or more miners, all heavily armed.

They were gathered around two bodies that lay motionless on the ground.

Gentry recognized the faces of some of the men in the crowd, so he promptly went forward to learn the purpose of their early visit to the ravine.

It took him only a few moments to find out that some fifty of the oldest miners in that region had organized themselves into a vigilance committee, and had started out in search of the desperate outlaws who were known as the Shadows of the Hills.

They had found at the bottom of the cliff below the cave which Gentry had discovered the night before, the mangled bodies of Hamp Hull and one of his men.

Nearly all the old miners in the crowd had recognized the face of the big outlaw who had so long been a terror to the mining camps for miles around.

They were glad to find themselves safely rid of such a dangerous character, but some of the younger ones were disappointed because they had been unable to take him alive.

One of the leaders came forward and questioned Gentleman Joe to see if he knew anything about what had happened that ended in the death of Hamp Hull.

"His death was an accident; he fell over the cliff," was all the explanation Gentry cared to make.

"You have encountered the gang?"

"Yes, I met them last night."

"Where are they? Have you found their hiding-place?"

"I have found one of their hiding-places. I cannot say where they are to-day."

With Gentry acting as guide, the crowd of miners climbed up the narrow trail along the side of the cliff until they came to the trail of the outlaws.

They dashed into the place without waiting to see if it was occupied in the hope that they might be able to find some member of the gang alive.

But they were too late.

The cave was deserted.

Everything of value which could be easily carried away was gone.

Heavy pieces of quartz, mining tools, cooking utensils, and many articles of little value were scattered around the floor of the cave in great confusion.

The outlaws had evidently departed in great haste.

The members of the vigilance committee scattered through the hills and spent the entire day in a vain search for the followers of the dead outlaw chief.

No trace of them could be found, and the Shadows of the Hills were never seen again in that region.

Gentleman Joe joined in the search for a little while, but failing to strike the trail of the fugitives, he left the vigilantes to complete the work, and returned to the railroad station.

The officers of the company by which he was employed had not yet arrived.

Gentry found Reuben Waters, the landlord of the hotel, and his wife and daughter busy preparing for a dance that was to take place that night.

A long, rambling, wooden building situated on the main street of the town which had been put up for a saloon and gambling-hall, but was now unoccupied, had been engaged by a committee of miners, and they were going to give a public dance.

It was to be the first affair of the kind that had ever taken place in the little mining town, and every one was interested.

There were very few women in the place, but others had been invited, and were coming from every mining camp and town for twenty miles around.

For days the proposed dance at Frog Back Curve had been the talk of all that section of the country.

Miss Nancy Waters, the pretty daughter of the landlord of the hotel of Frog Back Curve, who had taken an active part in getting up the affair, and had superintended the work of decorating the hall, expected to be the belle of the ball.

Gentleman Joe was invited by the landlord to attend, and as he had nothing else on hand for that night he promised to do so.

It was nine o'clock when Gentry entered the big dance hall.

The place was lighted by a hundred kerosene lamps and lanterns, and it was already well-filled with rough miners and coarse-featured women.

A large open space was left in the middle of the floor for the dancers.

Around the sides of the building were small stands for refreshments, and a bar had been fitted up at the back end for the occasion.

Perched on a small platform at one side of the hall was Black Joe, the fiddler.

The negro, who had been an active member of the Rocky Rangers until they were disbanded and almost exterminated by their more successful rivals, was the only violin player to be found in any of the near-by camps.

He had been engaged to furnish music for the night, and was to receive a considerable sum of money for the performance on condition that he did not break down, but fiddled as often and as long as any one wanted to dance. It was a strange-looking throng gathered there in the big dance hall.

Women in calico, or plain woolen dresses, danced with big, rough-looking miners in woolen shirts and overalls.

Almost every man in the room wore a heavy leather belt around his waist, and from these belts stuck up in plain view the handles of big revolvers and long-bladed bowie-knives.

There were ten men present to every woman, and the rivalry between the rough miners to be first to dance with the young girls of the party was intense.

It was like dancing on the brink of a volcano which might break forth at any moment.

Scores of times only the tact and ready wit of the women prevented bloody encounters, when two or more of the miners would claim the hand of a girl for some particular dance.

The ball was in full swing when Gentry entered the place.

A score of couples were in the middle of the floor dancing an old Virginia reel, and Black Joe had fiddled until the perspiration was beginning to roll in streams down his ebony face.

At the temporary bar at the rear of the building, a hundred miners who could find no partners for that dance were gathered drinking whisky as fast as three bartenders could pour it out for them.

Gentry slipped quietly into one corner of the room near an open window, and stood watching the strange scene in silence.

He could get more amusement out of it as a spectator, and, therefore, had no intention of taking part in the dance.

In swinging corners the dancers passed and turned close to where he was standing.

The reel was soon ended, and then while another batch of miners were picking out their partners to make up another set, Black Joe played a waltz.

Very few of those present at the ball knew anything of this form of dancing.

But as the waltz music struck up, Gentry saw a slender young man, stylishly dressed, pick out a rather good-looking girl in the crowd, and the two waltzed across the room, keeping fairly good step to the music.

As the faces of the couple were turned toward Gentleman Joe in the full glare of the kerosene lamps, he recognized the young man as Billy Gramer, the gambler.

A moment later the eyes of the two men met.

The face of the young gambler turned pale in an instant, and, without waiting to finish the waltz, he conducted his partner back to her seat and left her without even a word of apology.

Then Gramer, mingling with the crowd, tried to slip out of the building unobserved.

The attempt was a failure.

Before he was half-way to the door, Gentry met him face to face.

"A word with you," said the Gilt-Edged Sport, quietly, as he touched Gramer on the shoulder.

The two men moved over to the window out of the thick of the crowd.

"What do you want now?" asked Gramer, sullenly. "I told you I had thrown up my hand and quit the game."

"You cannot quit a game like this until it is finished," replied Gentry.

"Well, you must find a way to finish this up without me. I have had enough of it."

"Have you cashed in your due bill?"

"Why do you ask?"

"I may want you to go to Denver with me. You had better get your money before you start. It may be some time before you can come back."

For a moment the young gambler was silent, but he looked sharply at Gentry to see if the latter was in earnest. Just then the music of the violin started up again.

Black Joe was playing a lively reel, and a score of couples were on the floor in a moment dancing in time to the music.

The heavy boots of the miners thumping on the rough wooden floor drowned all other sounds in the hall.

Billy Gramer cast a quick, anxious glance toward the open door, which was fifty feet away.

The Gilt-Edged Sport barred the way, and there was no escape in that direction.

At his side there was an open window just large enough to admit the passage of his body.

Outside was darkness, and the possibility of escape if he could get safely through that small opening in the wall.

Like a flash, the lucky young gambler sprang forward and hurled himself through the window at a bound.

Gentleman Joe caught a glimpse of him as he disap-

peared into the darkness outside, and heard the clatter of his feet as he ran rapidly away.

"He'll turn up again like a bad dollar," said Gentry, with a smile, and he made no effort to overtake the fleeing young gambler.

Another man on the floor of the big dance hall had attracted the attention of the Gilt-Edged Sport.

A broad-shouldered, heavily bearded man dressed in the common garb of a miner was dancing with Nancy Waters, who was the belle of the ball.

The couple were on the other side of the room, but there was in the face and form of the man something that seemed familiar to Gentleman Joe.

Another point that attracted his attention to the fellow was the fact that he was very heavily armed and carried weapons of the most improved pattern.

In his belt were two big revolvers with pearl handles, and a long, keen-bladed bowie-knife, while in the breast pocket of his miner's jacket was a smaller pistol.

The fellow was a clumsy and awkward dancer, but he seemed devoted to his partner and she was evidently well pleased with him in spite of his rough appearance.

Above the heavy thumping of the rough shod dancers and the din of the fiddle could be heard the voice of the master of ceremonies calling the figures of the dance.

"Promenade all!"

The voice of the caller rang out like a fog-horn above the roar of the dance.

The twenty couples on the floor joined hands and turned to execute the movement.

Nancy Waters and her big partner were near the centre of the circle that was left open for the dancers.

In attempting to turn quickly to get into line, the big fellow got tangled up with himself, one foot slipped, and he fell sprawling on the floor.

As he went down a gold coin slipped from his pocket and rolled swiftly across the floor between the feet of the dancers to the other side of the room.

Striking a rough board the rolling coin spun slowly around once or twice, and stopped almost at the feet of Gentleman Joe.

The latter picked up the piece of gold and looked at it carefully.

"Why, it's my double eagle, my mascot!" he exclaimed aloud.

It was indeed the coin he had lost in the deserted cabin in the hills the night he first met the Rocky Rangers.

"The partner of Nancy Waters is Mike Molony!" said Gentry, with a quiet smile, as he turned to watch the big fellow who was scrambling to his feet.

The big outlaw, who was now without a gang to lead, was so upset by his fall he had not noticed the loss of the double eagle.

The dance went on after the brief interruption, and Gentry moved in a little closer to the dancers.

He did not want to take any chances of losing sight of Mike Molony.

In a few minutes the reel was ended, and the men were awkwardly conducting their partners back to their seats, or to the nearest refreshment booth.

Mike Molony and Nancy Waters, walking arm in arm, moved over to a window on the other side of the room apart from the crowd.

Gentleman Joe kept them in sight without getting near enough to attract their attention.

The couple were in earnest conversation when Gentry heard a slight stir behind him, and felt some one push by him as if in great haste.

He caught a glimpse of a tall, slender woman in black rushing forward toward the couple by the window.

Nancy Waters turned as the figure in black approached, and uttered a wild cry of terror.

Mike Molony, startled by the scream of his companion, wheeled around and at the same moment reached for his pistols.

But he was too late.

A slender knife flashed in the lamp-light, the woman in black, with a low cry of rage, sprang forward and the knife was buried to the hilt in the breast of Mike Molony.

The chief of the Rocky Rangers threw up his hands,

staggered a few steps, and fell face downward on the floor. He had reached his heart, and he was dead when picked up.

Nancy Waters, the belle of the ball, fled screaming from the scene, and in the confusion that followed, the woman in black slipped through the crowd as swiftly and silently as a shadow.

She reached the door before any one thought of stopping her, and a moment later she vanished in the darkness.

Gentleman Joe had caught a fleeting glimpse of the face of the woman in black, and when he saw Mike Molony pitch forward with the knife in his heart, he knew that the vengeance of Mournful Mary was complete.

The body of Mike Molony was removed from the hall, and in five minutes the great dance at Frog Back Curve was going on as if nothing unusual had happened.

The Gilt-Edged Sport was well pleased at the recovery of his double eagle, which he had carried for years as a lucky talisman.

But he was disappointed because Mournful Mary had at the last moment cheated him out of a chance to settle accounts with the big outlaw chief who had tried so hard to put him out of the way.

The officers of the company that had employed Gentleman Joe to locate the Hamp Hull Mine arrived in Frog Back Curve on the following day.

It was Billy Gramer, the gambler, who, playing traitor to the gang of which he had long been a member, had sold to the company a tip on the location of the property.

He had secured his money in advance, with a promise of more if the mine was found to be as represented.

Then he returned to Frog Back Curve and would have defeated the efforts of Gentleman Joe to locate the property if he had been able to do so.

But in cunning and courage the lucky gambler was no match for Joseph Gentry.

When he found that the game had gone against him, after his escape from the dance hall, he fled from that locality at once, and never came back.

The company promptly took possession of the Hamp Hull Mine, which proved to be the richest in all the West.

It yielded fortunes for all those interested, and Gentleman Joe, for his fearless and successful work in breaking up two bands of outlaws and locating the rich mine, received from the company a substantial reward.

The further exploits of Gentleman Joe will be graphically portrayed in a future issue under the title of "Gentleman Joe's Jeopardy; or, The Cool Clan of Camp Careful."

(THE END.)

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